

# DAN BROWN

## TEACHES WRITING THRILLERS

[MASTERCLASS]

## MEET YOUR INSTRUCTOR

# DAN BROWN



Dan Brown is the author of numerous notable novels, including *The Da Vinci Code*, which has become one of the bestselling novels of all time as well as the subject of intellectual debate among readers and scholars. Brown's novels are published in 56 languages around the world with over 200 million copies in print.

In 2005, Brown was named one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World by *TIME Magazine*, whose editors credited him with "keeping the publishing industry afloat; renewed interest in Leonardo da Vinci and early Christian history; spiking tourism to Paris and Rome; a growing membership in secret societies; the ire of Cardinals in Rome; eight books denying the claims of the novel and seven guides to read along with it; a flood of

historical thrillers; and a major motion picture franchise."

The son of a mathematics teacher and a church organist, Brown was raised on a prep school campus where he developed a fascination with the paradoxical interplay between science and religion. These themes eventually formed the backdrop for his books. He is a graduate of Amherst College and Phillips Exeter Academy, where he later returned to teach English before focusing his attention full time to writing. He lives in New England.

Brown's latest novel, *Origin*, explores two of the fundamental questions of humankind: Where do we come from? Where are we going?

Dear friends,

Storytelling is the oldest art form on earth, and whether you're a fan of thrillers, classics, literary fiction, or even ancient myths, the stories you love all share the same key elements.

Understanding these universal components is one of the secrets to making your own writing much more effective and successful. It can also make the writing process a lot more fun.

In this class, I hope to unlock for you a toolbox of ideas that you can use immediately as you write your own novel. It is the same toolbox I used to write *The Da Vinci Code* and all of my books. My sincere desire is that this class inspires in you a passion for the writing process as well as the confidence to master your own personal voice and create a story that is distinctly your own.

And with luck, we might just have some fun along the way.

See you in class,

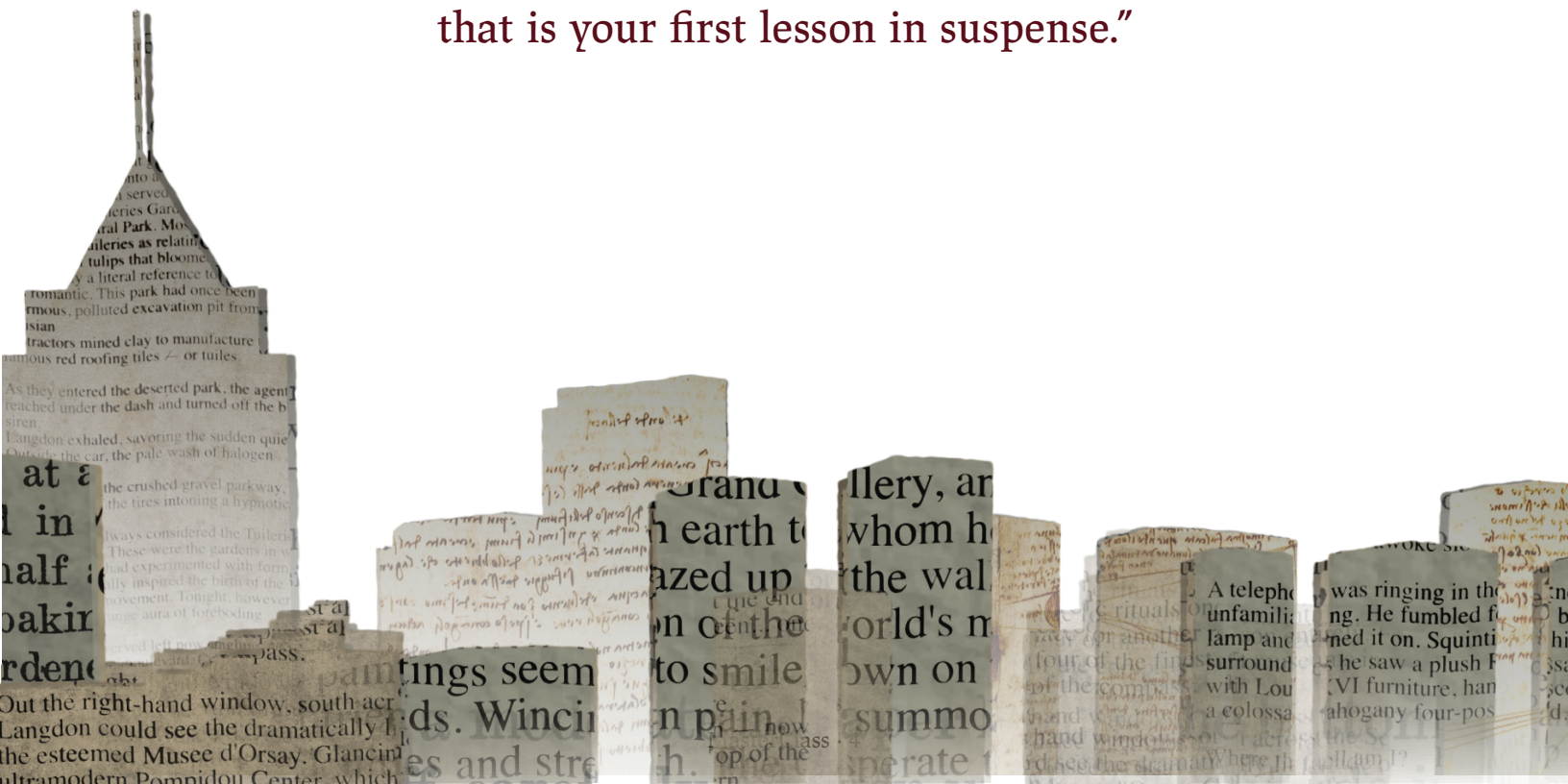
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dan Brown', with a stylized flourish underneath.

## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

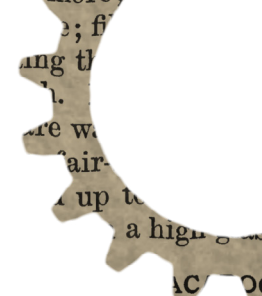
I

DAN BROWN

"At the end of this MasterClass, I am going to admit something to you that I have never admitted to anyone on Earth. I'm also going to show you an artifact that nobody except me has ever seen. And that is your first lesson in suspense."







# INTRODUCTION

## CHAPTER REVIEW

Storytelling is the oldest human art form. Whether spoken, or in a book, or in a painting, or even in a piece of music, storytelling has always had at its core a single consistent ambition: to capture and sustain our attention.

In this class, Dan will discuss this critical element of storytelling and show how it applies to writing novels. He'll share the techniques that he used to build his own novels—suspense, plot, action, research, and character development—and demonstrate how he uses these tools to serve the specific goal of keeping the reader engaged.

If you've ever taken a writing class, you've probably heard the familiar advice: "Write what you know" and "Show, don't tell." While these maxims can be helpful, they won't get you through the complicated task of writing a novel. Dan acquired his tools the way most writers do: by reading books and writing his own. But as a writer who has successfully practiced sustaining a reader's attention over the course of seven novels, his advice goes well beyond using writerly sleight-of-hand to build suspense. It involves finding your individual passions, understanding the nuances of depicting a world, developing specific research techniques, and learning skills that allow surprising connections to be made between your plot lines and characters.

Because this class involves a lot of nuts-and-bolts advice, Dan often uses specific examples from his own works. Some of the examples

contain spoilers. Before you get started, it's a good idea to read the following of his novels: *Digital Fortress* (1998), *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), *The Lost Symbol* (2009), *Inferno* (2013), and *Origin* (2017).

## LEARN MORE

Throughout the course, you'll hear the term "thriller" applied in its broadest sense to mean novels of suspense. Although this is a modern term, thrillers have existed throughout history. Examples range from Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 725 BCE) through fairy tales and folklore right up to the genre's first popular novel, Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844). Today's category has become sprawling enough to contain numerous subtypes, such as espionage, legal, political, crime, psychological, and science fiction. Any book can generate excitement, suspense, interest, and exhilaration, but because these are the primary goals of the thriller genre, its authors have a laser-focused expertise in keeping a reader interested. So whether you're writing a thriller or just looking to borrow from the toolbox, the techniques of this class can help you.

Check out National Public Radio's [list of top thrillers](#) or turn to any of the classic novels below for examples that blend thriller elements into other genres.

*Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley

*Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë

*The Woman in White* (1860) by Wilkie Collins

*Treasure Island* (1883) by Robert Louis Stevenson

*The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James

*Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley

*Rebecca* (1938) by Daphne du Maurier.  
*Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison  
*Lolita* (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov  
*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee  
*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962)  
by Ken Kesey

#### WRITING EXERCISES

*The coursework offered in this book is divided into two sections. **Writing Exercises** are for everyone, offering ways to practice the skills Dan teaches in the video lessons. The **For Your Novel** section is tailored to writers who want to begin or are already at work on a novel. This section applies the lessons to the overall process of developing a book-length work.*

Keep a notebook devoted solely to this course. Many of the assignments build on previous ones and will lead you through the process of finding your setting, developing characters, building a story, and researching your subject matter. If you've already finished a novel, you can jump in at any point to strengthen your work. Dan provides an abundance of practical advice that will help you understand how to keep your reader's attention up until the very last page.

In her book of writing advice, *Writing Down the Bones* (1986), Natalie Goldberg says "Talk is the exercise ground for writing." All of us tell stories whenever we talk. Think of three recent examples when someone has said something that caught your interest. This could be anything from a casual conversation with a co-worker to a tragic event you heard about on the nightly news. Write these three stories—no matter how short they are—in your notebook and record the following things about each one: the exact moment that you became interested in the story, why you were interested, and, once your interest was piqued, what more you wanted to know.

The image is a complex collage. The top half features a dark blue background with a subtle, repeating pattern of small, light blue squares. Below this, there are several rectangular sections of different colors and patterns. On the left, there's a section with a dark blue background and a pattern of small, light blue squares. To its right is a section with a light blue background and a pattern of small, light blue squares. The bottom section is a collage of various textures, including a dark blue background, a light blue background, and a pattern of small, light blue squares. The collage is composed of several rectangular sections of different colors and patterns, arranged in a grid-like fashion. The top section is dark blue with a subtle pattern. Below it is a light blue section with a pattern of small, light blue squares. The bottom section is a collage of various textures, including a dark blue background, a light blue background, and a pattern of small, light blue squares.

The image features a layered design. The top half has a dark red, textured background. Below this, a white rectangular area contains the chapter title and author name in a dark red serif font. At the very bottom, there is a horizontal strip of torn, aged paper. These paper scraps contain various fragments of text, some legible and others partially obscured or mirrored, appearing to be pulled from different parts of Dan Brown's novels.

MASTERCLASS

## CHAPTER TWO THE ANATOMY OF A THRILLER

I

DAN BROWN

"Suspense is all about making promises. It's about telling a reader, 'I know something you don't know. And I promise, if you turn the page, I'm going to tell you.'"

A collage of torn, aged paper strips with various text fragments, including "Grand Gallery, and", "whom he", "the wall", "world's m", "summo", "rituals", "A telepho", "unfamiliar", "lamp and", "surround", "with Lou", "a colossa", "was ringing in the", "ng. He fumbled fr", "ned it on. Squinti", "he saw a plush F", "VI furniture, han", "ahogany four-pos", "d.", "b.", "hi", "ssa", "sec", "d.", "the end", "cent", "and", "four of the fine", "of the com", "hand windo", "rd see the drama", "By the late 19th", "at a", "in", "alf", "akir", "Out the right-hand window, south ac", "Langdon could see the dramatically li", "the esteemed Musee d'Orsay. Glancin", "ultramodern Pompidou Center, which", "ings seem", "ls. Wincir", "landstre".

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# THE ANATOMY OF A THRILLER

## SUBCHAPTERS

*The Elements of a Story*

*The Three C's*

*Pace, Promises, Suspense*

*First, Read Critically*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

Suspense begins with the three C's: the contract, the clock, and the crucible.

The contract is an implied promise you make to the reader about what will be delivered by the end of the book. The contract in *Moby Dick* (1851) for example, is that the reader will find out whether or not Ahab has caught the whale. In any novel, there are hundreds of promises, small and large. It is crucial in storytelling that you keep every single promise you have made, no matter how trivial. If you've suggested that your protagonist wants to buy a little black dress, by the end we've got to see her buy one or understand why she didn't.

Clock refers to the fact that adding time pressure to any character's struggle will create higher stakes and more interest for your reader. There are thousands of ways to add time pressure—it will depend on your characters and their world—but don't be afraid to use standard "clock" elements like ticking bombs or villains who manage to stay one step ahead. The goal of this element is not to be stunningly original but to invest your story with a pressure that will prompt conflicts and intense responses from your characters.

Think of the crucible as a box that constrains your characters, offers them no escape, and

forces them to act. Your story should present an increasingly difficult series of tasks and situations for the hero that will funnel him into the most severe trial of all. You must make sure that each successive task is harder than the previous one and that, for the hero, there is no escape. If readers begin to sense that the journey is becoming easier, they will lose interest.

Keeping a reader's attention means making promises and fulfilling them. Dan's preferred style is to make a lot of promises early in the novel and to deliver on them quickly. In order to sustain attention, he resolves one promise and then makes another simultaneously. He accomplishes this with short chapters and tightly-focused scenes. This creates a kind of patchwork of promises that are laid down throughout the narrative. In order for this to be effective, the promises must have a clock effect (something must be hurrying the characters along) as well as a crucible effect (they must increase in intensity, and the reader must feel that they are leading to an ultimate and coherent objective).

People often define thrillers as novels of high stakes and suspense, but these elements exist in every story. You don't need a nuclear bomb to create high stakes. Whatever the stakes are, they need to be high for your protagonist. Perhaps your hero is trying to save his restaurant from closing, or he's trying to keep his



child out of prison. The things that compel your protagonist will become gripping to your reader. What makes a book a thriller is the pace at which the promises are kept. Questions you raise for the reader are often answered quickly and will lead to more questions. The questions with the biggest stakes are revealed more slowly throughout the course of the novel.

Dan emphasizes reading as a critical step in becoming a great writer. You might read to learn, to enjoy a story, or to look for inspiration, but when you start to write a novel, you should begin reading with a critical eye. Study how other writers are practicing the craft. Find the things that thrill you, and learn from the things that don't. Pay attention to the way your favorite novels are put together. You'll be using all this information in crafting your own novel.

#### LEARN MORE

One of Dan's primary influences is Robert Ludlum's *Bourne Identity* (1980). It serves as an example of the power of a simple promise: Jason Bourne has amnesia—will he find out who he is? If you have the time, treat yourself to a weekend curled up with the original Bourne Trilogy. In particular, study how Ludlum uses his premise to generate so many complicated and riveting situations.

*The Bourne Identity* (1980)

*The Bourne Supremacy* (1986)

*The Bourne Ultimatum* (1990)

Dan's novel *Inferno* (2013) opens with Langdon being pursued by an assassin. Applying the crucible means that for the rest of the novel, Langdon's life must continue to be in danger. If it is no longer in danger, then that tension must be replaced by an even bigger danger (such

as a threat not only to his life but to the lives of others whom he cares about). The crucible means that things are going to get even more miserable for Langdon, and there is only one way out—and that is to face the villain. Read the first few chapters of *Inferno* (2013), reproduced on the following pages, and note the promises and how quickly they are fulfilled (or not). What creates the time pressure? And how does Dan create the sense that Langdon is being forced into a confrontation with his antagonist?

For more information on when and how to make promises and reveal information, read *Mastering Suspense, Structure, and Plot* (2016) by award-winning author Jane K. Cleland. Jane takes a close look at what sorts of information should be revealed at what speed, and she offers various techniques to do that.

The clock is a central feature in most thrillers. For a comprehensive look at a variety of time pressure devices, check out the first season of *24* (2001), a television show renowned for its real-time pacing and edge-of-your-seat suspense. In your notebook, make a list of the ways in which the show creates pressure for its characters. Are you using any of these techniques in your writing? Which ones are your favorites?

For a fun look at the crucible aspect of thrillers, scan through these common "[escape tropes](#)" compiled by TVTropes and consider which, if any, you have used or would like to play around with in your own story.

**WRITING EXERCISES**

In your notebook, go back to the three stories from the assignment in Chapter 1: Introduction (or use your novel-in-progress). Choose one of the stories and apply the three C's to it, answering the following questions:

What was the contract in the story? How slowly or quickly was information revealed? Did you ever grow bored by the story? Did new promises emerge during the telling of the story? What sort of time pressure exists in the tale? Did the narrative grow more intense, or did it falter?

Now re-write the story according to the anatomy of a thriller. Add in promises, create a time pressure, and refine the crucible to heat things up.

AN EXCERPT FROM

## INFERNO

Dan Brown

## CHAPTER 1

The memories materialized slowly ... like bubbles surfacing from the darkness of a bottomless well.

*A veiled woman.*

Robert Langdon gazed at her across a river whose churning waters ran red with blood. On the far bank, the woman stood facing him, motionless, solemn, her face hidden by a shroud. In her hand she gripped a blue tainia cloth, which she now raised in honor of the sea of corpses at her feet. The smell of death hung everywhere.

*Seek, the woman whispered. And ye shall find.*

Langdon heard the words as if she had spoken them inside his head. "Who are you?" he called out, but his voice made no sound.

*Time grows short, she whispered. Seek and find.*

Langdon took a step toward the river, but he could see the waters were bloodred and too deep to traverse. When Langdon raised his eyes again to the veiled woman, the bodies at her feet had multiplied. There were hundreds of them now, maybe thousands, some still alive, writhing in agony, dying unthinkable deaths ... consumed by fire, buried in feces, devouring one another. He could hear the mournful cries of human suffering echoing across the water.

The woman moved toward him, holding out her slender hands, as if beckoning for help.

"Who are you?!" Langdon again shouted.

In response, the woman reached up and slowly lifted the veil from her face. She was strikingly beautiful, and yet older than Langdon had

imagined—in her sixties perhaps, stately and strong, like a timeless statue. She had a sternly set jaw, deep soulful eyes, and long, silver-gray hair that cascaded over her shoulders in ringlets. An amulet of lapis lazuli hung around her neck—a single snake coiled around a staff.

Langdon sensed he knew her ... trusted her. *But how? Why?*

She pointed now to a writhing pair of legs, which protruded upside down from the earth, apparently belonging to some poor soul who had been buried headfirst to his waist. The man's pale thigh bore a single letter—written in mud—R.

R? Langdon thought, uncertain. *As in ... Robert? "Is that ... me?"*

The woman's face revealed nothing. *Seek and find,* she repeated.

Without warning, she began radiating a white light ... brighter and brighter. Her entire body started vibrating intensely, and then, in a rush of thunder, she exploded into a thousand splintering shards of light.

Langdon bolted awake, shouting.

The room was bright. He was alone. The sharp smell of medicinal alcohol hung in the air, and somewhere a machine pinged in quiet rhythm with his heart. Langdon tried to move his right arm, but a sharp pain restrained him. He looked down and saw an IV tugging at the skin of his forearm.

His pulse quickened, and the machines kept pace, pinging more rapidly.

*Where am I? What happened?*

The back of Langdon's head throbbed, a gnawing pain. Gingerly, he reached up with his free arm and touched his scalp, trying to locate the source of his headache. Beneath his matted hair, he found the hard nubs of a dozen or so stitches caked with dried blood.

He closed his eyes, trying to remember an accident.

Nothing. A total blank.

*Think.*

Only darkness.

A man in scrubs hurried in, apparently alerted by Langdon's racing heart monitor. He had a shaggy beard, bushy mustache, and gentle eyes that radiated a thoughtful calm beneath his overgrown eyebrows.

"What ... happened?" Langdon managed. "Did I have an accident?"

The bearded man put a finger to his lips and then rushed out, calling for someone down the hall.

Langdon turned his head, but the movement sent a spike of pain radiating through his skull. He took deep breaths and let the pain pass. Then, very gently and methodically, he surveyed his sterile surroundings.

The hospital room had a single bed. No flowers. No cards. Langdon saw his clothes on a nearby counter, folded inside a clear plastic bag. They were covered with blood.

*My God. It must have been bad.*

Now Langdon rotated his head very slowly toward the window beside his bed. It was dark outside. Night. All Langdon could see in the glass was his own reflection—an ashen stranger, pale and weary, attached to tubes and wires, surrounded by medical equipment.

Voices approached in the hall, and Langdon turned his gaze back toward the room. The doctor returned, now accompanied by a woman.

She appeared to be in her early thirties. She wore blue scrubs and had tied her blond hair back in a thick ponytail that swung behind her as she walked.

"I'm Dr. Sienna Brooks," she said, giving Langdon a smile as she entered. "I'll be working with Dr. Marconi tonight."

Langdon nodded weakly.

Tall and lissome, Dr. Brooks moved with the assertive gait of an athlete. Even in shapeless scrubs, she had a willowy elegance about her. Despite the absence of any makeup that Langdon could see, her complexion appeared unusually smooth, the only blemish a tiny beauty mark just above her lips. Her eyes, though a gentle brown, seemed unusually penetrating, as if they had witnessed a profundity of experience rarely encountered by a person her age.

"Dr. Marconi doesn't speak much English," she said, sitting down beside him, "and he asked me to fill out your admittance form." She gave him another smile.

"Thanks," Langdon croaked.

"Okay," she began, her tone businesslike. "What is your name?"

It took him a moment. "Robert ... Langdon."

She shone a penlight in Langdon's eyes.

"Occupation?"

This information surfaced even more slowly.

"Professor. Art history ... and symbology.

Harvard University."

Dr. Brooks lowered the light, looking startled.

The doctor with the bushy eyebrows looked equally surprised.

"You're ... an American?"

Langdon gave her a confused look.

"It's just ..." She hesitated. "You had no identification when you arrived tonight. You were wearing Harris Tweed and Somerset loafers, so we guessed British."



"I'm American," Langdon assured her, too exhausted to explain his preference for well-tailored clothing.

"Any pain?"

"My head," Langdon replied, his throbbing skull only made worse by the bright penlight.

Thankfully, she now pocketed it, taking Langdon's wrist and checking his pulse.

"You woke up shouting," the woman said. "Do you remember why?"

Langdon flashed again on the strange vision of the veiled woman surrounded by writhing bodies. *Seek and ye shall find*. "I was having a nightmare."

"About?"

Langdon told her.

Dr. Brooks's expression remained neutral as she made notes on a clipboard. "Any idea what might have sparked such a frightening vision?"

Langdon probed his memory and then shook his head, which pounded in protest.

"Okay, Mr. Langdon," she said, still writing, "a couple of routine questions for you. What day of the week is it?"

Langdon thought for a moment. "It's Saturday. I remember earlier today walking across campus ... going to an afternoon lecture series, and then ... that's pretty much the last thing I remember. Did I fall?"

"We'll get to that. Do you know where you are?"

Langdon took his best guess. "Massachusetts General Hospital?"

Dr. Brooks made another note. "And is there someone we should call for you? Wife?

Children?"

"Nobody," Langdon replied instinctively. He had always enjoyed the solitude and independence provided him by his chosen life of bachelorhood, although he had to admit, in his current situation, he'd prefer to have a familiar face at his side. "There are some colleagues I could call, but I'm fine."

Dr. Brooks finished writing, and the older doctor approached. Smoothing back his bushy eyebrows, he produced a small voice recorder from his pocket and showed it to Dr.

Brooks. She nodded in understanding and turned back to her patient.

"Mr. Langdon, when you arrived tonight, you were mumbling something over and over."

She glanced at Dr. Marconi, who held up the digital recorder and pressed a button.

A recording began to play, and Langdon heard his own groggy voice, repeatedly muttering the same phrase: "*Ve ... sorry. Ve ... sorry.*"

"It sounds to me," the woman said, "like you're saying, 'Very sorry. Very sorry.'"

Langdon agreed, and yet he had no recollection of it.

Dr. Brooks fixed him with a disquietingly intense stare. "Do you have any idea why you'd be saying this? Are you sorry about something?"

As Langdon probed the dark recesses of his memory, he again saw the veiled woman.

She was standing on the banks of a bloodred river surrounded by bodies. The stench of death returned.

Langdon was overcome by a sudden, instinctive sense of danger ... not just for himself... but for everyone. The pinging of his heart monitor accelerated rapidly. His muscles tightened, and he tried to sit up.

Dr. Brooks quickly placed a firm hand on Langdon's sternum, forcing him back down.

She shot a glance at the bearded doctor, who walked over to a nearby counter and began preparing something.

Dr. Brooks hovered over Langdon, whispering now. "Mr. Langdon, anxiety is common with brain injuries, but you need to keep your pulse rate down. No movement. No excitement. Just lie still and rest. You'll be okay. Your memory will come back slowly."

The doctor returned now with a syringe, which he handed to Dr. Brooks. She injected its contents into Langdon's IV.

"Just a mild sedative to calm you down," she explained, "and also to help with the pain." She stood to go. "You'll be fine, Mr. Langdon. Just sleep. If you need anything, press the button on your bedside."

She turned out the light and departed with the bearded doctor.

In the darkness, Langdon felt the drugs washing through his system almost instantly, dragging his body back down into that deep well from which he had emerged. He fought the feeling, forcing his eyes open in the darkness of his room. He tried to sit up, but his body felt like cement.

As Langdon shifted, he found himself again facing the window. The lights were out, and in the dark glass, his own reflection had disappeared, replaced by an illuminated skyline in the distance.

Amid a contour of spires and domes, a single regal facade dominated Langdon's field of view. The building was an imposing stone fortress with a notched parapet and a three hundred-foot tower that swelled near the top, bulging outward into a massive machicolated battlement.

Langdon sat bolt upright in bed, pain exploding in his head. He fought off the searing throb and fixed his gaze on the tower.

Langdon knew the medieval structure well.

It was unique in the world.

Unfortunately, it was also located four thousand miles from Massachusetts.

—

Outside his window, hidden in the shadows of the Via Torregalli, a powerfully built woman effortlessly unstraddled her BMW motorcycle and advanced with the intensity of a panther stalking its prey. Her gaze was sharp. Her close-cropped hair—styled into spikes—stood out against the upturned collar of her black leather riding suit. She checked her silenced weapon, and stared up at the window where Robert Langdon's light had just gone out.

Earlier tonight her original mission had gone horribly awry.

*The coo of a single dove had changed everything.*  
Now she had come to make it right.

## CHAPTER 2

*I'm in Florence!?*

Robert Langdon's head throbbed. He was now seated upright in his hospital bed, repeatedly jamming his finger into the call button. Despite the sedatives in his system, his heart was racing.

Dr. Brooks hurried back in, her ponytail bobbing. "Are you okay?"

Langdon shook his head in bewilderment. "I'm in ... Italy!?"

"Good," she said. "You're remembering."

"No!" Langdon pointed out the window at the commanding edifice in the distance. "I recognize the Palazzo Vecchio."

Dr. Brooks flicked the lights back on, and the Florence skyline disappeared. She came to his bedside, whispering calmly. "Mr. Langdon, there's no need to worry. You're suffering from mild amnesia, but Dr. Marconi confirmed that your brain function is fine."

The bearded doctor rushed in as well, apparently hearing the call button. He checked

Langdon's heart monitor as the young doctor spoke to him in rapid, fluent Italian—something about how Langdon was "agitato" to learn he was in Italy.

Agitated? Langdon thought angrily. More like stupefied! The adrenaline surging through his system was now doing battle with the sedatives. "What happened to me?" he demanded. "What day is it?!"

"Everything is fine," she said. "It's early morning. Monday, March eighteenth."

Monday. Langdon forced his aching mind to reel back to the last images he could recall—cold and dark—walking alone across the Harvard campus to a Saturday-night lecture series. That was two

days ago?! A sharper panic now gripped him as he tried to recall anything at all from the lecture or afterward. Nothing. The ping of his heart monitor accelerated.

The older doctor scratched at his beard and continued adjusting equipment while Dr.

Brooks sat again beside Langdon.

"You're going to be okay," she reassured him, speaking gently. "We've diagnosed you with retrograde amnesia, which is very common in head trauma. Your memories of the past few days may be muddled or missing, but you should suffer no permanent damage."

She paused. "Do you remember my first name? I told you when I walked in."

Langdon thought a moment. "Sienna." Dr. Sienna Brooks.

She smiled. "See? You're already forming new memories."

The pain in Langdon's head was almost unbearable, and his near-field vision remained blurry.

"What ... happened? How did I get here?"

"I think you should rest, and maybe—"

"How did I get here?!" he demanded, his heart monitor accelerating further.

"Okay, just breathe easy," Dr. Brooks said, exchanging a nervous look with her colleague. "I'll tell you." Her voice turned markedly more serious. "Mr. Langdon, three hours ago, you staggered into our emergency room, bleeding from a head wound, and you immediately collapsed. Nobody had any idea who you were or how you got here. You were mumbling in English, so Dr. Marconi asked me to assist. I'm on sabbatical here from the U.K."

Langdon felt like he had awoken inside a Max Ernst painting. What the hell am I doing in Italy? Normally Langdon came here every other June for an art conference, but this was March.

The sedatives pulled harder at him now, and he felt as if earth's gravity were growing stronger by the second, trying to drag him down through his mattress. Langdon fought it, hoisting his head, trying to stay alert.

Dr. Brooks leaned over him, hovering like an angel. "Please, Mr. Langdon," she whispered. "Head trauma is delicate in the first twenty-four hours. You need to rest, or you could do serious damage."

A voice crackled suddenly on the room's intercom. "Dr. Marconi?"

The bearded doctor touched a button on the wall and replied, "Sì?"

The voice on the intercom spoke in rapid Italian. Langdon didn't catch what it said, but he did catch the two doctors exchanging a look of surprise. Or is it alarm?

"Momento," Marconi replied, ending the conversation.

"What's going on?" Langdon asked.

Dr. Brooks's eyes seemed to narrow a bit. "That was the ICU receptionist. Someone's here to visit you."

A ray of hope cut through Langdon's grogginess. "That's good news! Maybe this person knows what happened to me."

She looked uncertain. "It's just odd that someone's here. We didn't have your name, and you're not even registered in the system yet."

Langdon battled the sedatives and awkwardly hoisted himself upright in his bed. "If someone knows I'm here, that person must know what happened!"

Dr. Brooks glanced at Dr. Marconi, who immediately shook his head and tapped his watch. She turned back to Langdon.

"This is the ICU," she explained. "Nobody is allowed in until nine A.M. at the earliest. In a moment Dr. Marconi will go out and see who the visitor is and what he or she wants."

"What about what I want?" Langdon demanded.

Dr. Brooks smiled patiently and lowered her voice, leaning closer. "Mr. Langdon, there are some things you don't know about last night ... about what happened to you. And before you speak to anyone, I think it's only fair that you have all the facts.

Unfortunately, I don't think you're strong enough yet to—"

"What facts!?" Langdon demanded, struggling to prop himself higher. The IV in his arm pinched, and his body felt like it weighed several hundred pounds. "All I know is I'm in a

Florence hospital and I arrived repeating the words 'very sorry ...' "

A frightening thought now occurred to him.

"Was I responsible for a car accident?" Langdon asked. "Did I hurt someone?!"

"No, no," she said. "I don't believe so."

"Then what?" Langdon insisted, eyeing both doctors furiously. "I have a right to know what's going on!"

There was a long silence, and Dr. Marconi finally gave his attractive young colleague a reluctant nod. Dr. Brooks exhaled and moved closer to his bedside. "Okay, let me tell you what I know ... and you'll listen calmly, agreed?"

Langdon nodded, the head movement sending a jolt of pain radiating through his skull.

He ignored it, eager for answers.

"The first thing is this ... Your head wound was not caused by an accident."

"Well, that's a relief."

"Not really. Your wound, in fact, was caused by a bullet."

Langdon's heart monitor pinged faster. "I beg your pardon!?"



Dr. Brooks spoke steadily but quickly. "A bullet grazed the top of your skull and most likely gave you a concussion. You're very lucky to be alive. An inch lower, and ..." She shook her head.

Langdon stared at her in disbelief. Someone shot me?

Angry voices erupted in the hall as an argument broke out. It sounded as if whoever had arrived to visit Langdon did not want to wait. Almost immediately, Langdon heard a heavy door at the far end of the hallway burst open. He watched until he saw a figure approaching down the corridor.

The woman was dressed entirely in black leather. She was toned and strong with dark, spiked hair. She moved effortlessly, as if her feet weren't touching the ground, and she was headed directly for Langdon's room.

Without hesitation, Dr. Marconi stepped into the open doorway to block the visitor's passage. "Ferma!" the man commanded, holding out his palm like a policeman.

The stranger, without breaking stride, produced a silenced handgun. She aimed directly at Dr. Marconi's chest and fired.

There was a staccato hiss.

Langdon watched in horror as Dr. Marconi staggered backward into the room, falling to the floor, clutching his chest, his white lab coat drenched in blood.

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## CHAPTER THREE FINDING THE IDEA

I

DAN BROWN

“No matter how good your idea is, or how fast you write, the sheer size of the project means you’re going to be doing this for a long time. Choose a topic that you’re really excited about.”



# FINDING THE IDEA

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Trust Your Taste*

*Write What You Want to Know*

*Start With the World*

*Identify Your Sole Dramatic Question*

*Find a Moral Gray Area*

*Think Like a Philosopher, Write Like a Thriller Writer*

*Focus on the “How” Not the “What”*

*Choosing the Right Idea*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

“What do I *want* to know?” This crucial question should be your jumping-off point. You’ll hear the advice to “write what you know.” Yet what draws forth our best energy and talent is often the desire to learn more about things we don’t know.

The first step in finding the idea for your novel is to discover your world. Dan’s book *Digital Fortress* (1998) came from his urge to know more about national security, and so that became his world. It helped him figure out who his characters would be, where the action would take place, and what would go on in that setting. Your choice should always be informed by your interests, so immerse yourself in books, television, movies, and anything else that inspires you. You’ll be silently accumulating the building blocks for your novel. Trust your own tastes. You’re going to be working with these subjects for a long time, so choose things that interest you enough to sustain you over the course of a novel.

Finding the core idea for your novel, what Dan calls the sole dramatic question, is essentially what your book is about. In this question, you

are establishing the main “contract” from the three C’s (see Chapter 2: The Anatomy of a Thriller). It is the biggest, most essential promise that you’re making to the reader and should always reflect the story’s highest stakes. For example, in *Inferno* (2013), Dan promises that by the end of the novel he will have answered the question: Will Robert Langdon find the virus and save the world? Because your sole dramatic question depends on understanding the motivations of your hero and villain, it may take some time to perfect. Right now, try to simplify your idea into its most basic question.

During your reading, also look for complex arguments that will lead you to moral gray areas. In researching *Digital Fortress*, Dan spoke with an NSA cryptologist who informed him that the government reads personal emails but that this act had successfully thwarted terrorist attempts on American soil. Is it all right to violate a citizen’s privacy in an effort to protect other citizens? A morally gray area like this one is perfect for generating conflict between characters. It will add richness to your hero and your villain, and it will engage your reader.

Don’t feel intimidated by having to come up with a big idea. Dan rightly points out that Ian

Fleming's James Bond novels are essentially iterations of the same story. It's not the "what" of the novels that makes them appealing, it's the "how." How does James Bond tackle each new quest? What colorful characters will he meet next? What new and unusual forms of violence will he encounter? Any idea you come up with has been done before. The "how" of your novel will be unique to you, and this will be the true appeal to your reader.

Perhaps you've come up with a number of big ideas, and they all seem appealing to you. In that case, start writing. Begin each story with a prologue or a first chapter and see which one feels best. Alternately, pretend the books are already published and write a marketing synopsis or book jacket copy for each of your ideas. Experimenting like this can help you get a better grasp of which of your ideas you most want to write.

Dan talks repeatedly in this course about the element of fun. He takes pleasure in his topics, his characters, and his writing. This is not just a technique to make the work more satisfying, it is also a nod to the intelligence of the instincts we all have which, when followed and indulged, can lead us in new directions and help us make unusual connections between seemingly unrelated elements. Part of the excitement of Dan's books comes from the juxtaposition of old-world history and cutting-edge science. It probably wouldn't be natural for most writers to blend these elements, but Dan's interest in these topics brought them together and created a winning combination that spawned the Robert Langdon series. Your own disparate interests have the potential to do the same, so trust that quiet voice in your head that says "I've always been curious about..."

#### LEARN MORE

Throughout this course, Dan presents tools that do what he calls the "heavy lifting." These techniques introduce strategies that allow you to convey a maximal amount of information while keeping the pace moving (and, crucially, not boring your reader). They are also tools for adding texture and complications to your characters and your plot, which is ultimately what will keep your reader interested.

In this chapter, finding the right moral gray area is the heavy lifter. Usually, this moral dilemma will emerge from the setting you create, but sometimes the dilemma itself is interesting enough that it will inspire your novel, which is how Dan came to write *Digital Fortress*. Can you think of any dilemmas that interest you? For some inspiration, take a look at [\*The 10 Biggest Moral Dilemmas in Science\*](#), [\*Physicians Top 20 Ethical Dilemmas\*](#), or check out the debates at the [\*Guardian's Ethics site\*](#).

Ian Fleming's books are less renowned for their sensual details, but Fleming wove them into almost every page, and they form an essential part of the "how" of his novels. He seemed to have an equal appreciation for pain and pleasure, and spent as much time describing alcohol and cigarettes as he did describing the beatings Bond takes. These "how" elements became the hallmark of Fleming's work. Fleming himself lived an indulgent life of luxury. But you needn't retire to Jamaica and drink martinis for breakfast to appreciate the hedonism of the James Bond life. Pick up copies of the best of the Bond novels and take a closer look at the ways that lavishing attention on a book's "how" can make a stale plot come to life.



*Moonraker* (1955)

*From Russia, With Love* (1957)

*Casino Royale* (1953)

#### WRITING EXERCISES

In your notebook, go back to the story you worked on in Chapter 2: The Anatomy of a Thriller. Using your imagination, come up with two or three incidents that could follow from the story. If you like, take the story in a surprising direction. Write a few paragraphs describing these incidents.

#### For Your Novel

If you're in the process of finding an idea for a novel, work through the next two assignments.

Ray Bradbury once said: "A writer is a magnet passing through a factual world, taking what he needs." On a page in your notebook titled "Topics," make a list of all the subjects that magnetize you right now. It doesn't matter if you just thought of them today. Free-write until you fill the page. If you find this difficult, scan news headlines and list all the stories that grab your interest. Once you've filled a page in your journal, go back over the entries and look for connections or themes.

Look over your list of interests from above and try to identify any moral gray areas. Write them in your notebook on a page titled "Moral Gray Area."

If you already have a novel-in-progress, identify your sole dramatic question. What are the highest stakes for the protagonist of your story? What is the primary contract you are making with the reader (i.e. what issue do you promise the reader you'll resolve by the end of the novel?). Write the sole dramatic question on a slip of paper and tack it to the wall by your writing desk. You'll go back to this question, what Dan calls your "north star," for the rest of your novel, particularly when you are stuck.

The background of the entire page is composed of numerous vertical strips of aged, yellowed paper or parchment. These strips are layered and slightly offset from each other, giving a three-dimensional effect. Each strip contains fragments of text written in various historical or fictional scripts, some resembling cursive and others more formal. The colors range from light cream to deep ochre and brown, suggesting age and wear.

MASTERCLASS

CHAPTER FOUR  
CHOOSING LOCATIONS

I

DAN BROWN

"Locations not only function as characters that have personalities, they can function as pillars of your structure."

A collage of torn paper strips with text, forming a city skyline silhouette against a white background. The strips are layered to create a sense of depth and height, with various fragments of text visible on the edges. The text on the strips includes phrases like "into a", "served", "eries Gard", "al Park, Mo", "eries as relat", "tulips that bloo", "a literal refer", "romantic. This park had once been", "rmous, polluted excavation pit from", "sian", "tractors mined clay to manufacture", "mious red roofing tiles / or tuiles.", "As they entered the deserted park, the agent", "reached under the dash and turned off the b", "siren.", "Langdon exhaled, savoring the sudden quiet", "Outside the car, the pale wash of halogen", "the crushed gravel parkway,", "the tires intoning a hypnotic", "ways considered the Tuileri", "These were the gardens in v", "ad experimented with form", "ly inspired the birth of the", "movement. Tonight, however", "ange aura of foreboding", "ved left now, and the", "pass.", "Out the right-hand window, south acr", "Langdon could see the dramatically li", "the esteemed Musee d'Orsay. Glancin", "ultramodern Pompidou Center, which", "Grand", "n earth to", "whom h", "the wal", "world's m", "own on", "summo", "to smile", "n pain", "op of the", "rituals", "A teleph", "unfamiliar", "lamp and", "surround", "with Lou", "a colossa", "was ringing in the", "ng. He fumbled f", "ned it on. Squinti", "he saw a plush F", "VI furniture, han", "ahogany four-pos", "d.", "at a", "in", "alf", "akir", "Out the right-hand window, south across the courtyard, Langdon could see the dramatically lit facade of the Louvre Museum, the ornate ironwork of the Pont Neuf, and the modern glass and steel of the Pompidou Center. The city of Paris was a tapestry of old and new, a place where history and the future intertwined. Langdon took a deep breath, the cool air filling his lungs. He felt a sense of purpose, a mission that had been entrusted to him. The city was his canvas, and he was the artist. He would paint a masterpiece that would change the world.

A collage of torn paper strips with text, forming a city skyline silhouette against a white background. The strips are layered to create a sense of depth and height, with various fragments of text visible on the edges. The text on the strips includes phrases like "into a", "served", "eries Gard", "al Park, Mo", "eries as relat", "tulips that bloo", "y a literal reference to", "romantic. This park had once been", "rmous, polluted excavation pit from", "sian", "tractors mined clay to manufacture", "mious red roofing tiles / or tuiles.", "As they entered the deserted park, the agent", "reached under the dash and turned off the b", "siren.", "Langdon exhaled, savoring the sudden quiet", "Outside the car, the pale wash of halogen", "the crushed gravel parkway,", "the tires intoning a hypnotic", "ways considered the Tuileri", "These were the gardens in v", "ad experimented with form", "ly inspired the birth of the", "movement. Tonight, however", "ange aura of foreboding", "ved left now, and the", "pass.", "at a", "in", "alf", "akir", "Out the right-hand window, south acr", "Langdon could see the dramatically li", "the esteemed Musee d'Orsay. Glancin", "ultramodern Pompidou Center, which", "Grand", "n earth to", "whom h", "the wal", "world's m", "own on", "summo", "to smile", "n pain", "op of the", "ings seem", "ls. Wincir", "and stre", "Gallery, an", "the end", "cent, and", "rituals", "A telepho", "unfamiliar", "lamp and", "surround", "with Lou", "a colossa", "was ringing in the", "ng. He fumbled fr", "ned it on. Squinti", "he saw a plush F", "VI furniture, han", "ahogany four-pos", "d.", "b", "hi", "ssa", "sec", "d.", "By the late 1980s,

A collage of torn paper strips with text, forming a city skyline silhouette against a white background. The strips are arranged to create the outlines of various buildings, with some text visible on the strips, such as "Grand", "Gallery, an", "whom h", "the wal", "world's n", "rituals", "A teleph", "unfamiliar", "lamp and", "surround", "with Lou", "a colossa", "was ring", "ng. He f", "ned it o", "Squint", "he saw", "a plush", "VI furn", "ahogany", "four-pos". The overall effect is a stylized, artistic representation of a cityscape.

# CHOOSING LOCATIONS

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Think of Location as a Character*

*Look to Location for Inspiration*

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Location is an enormously useful tool in novel-building. You should treat it as you would treat a character, allowing it to convey mood and letting it reveal more of itself over time. By selecting locations that excite you, you can transform relatively mundane scenes into more compelling ones. Your enthusiasm will come through in your writing, and your characters will view and interact with your locales in a more engaged way.

Location can also provide the inspiration for scenes and can even shape the course of your story. Dan chooses places that intrigue or excite him and will often use those places to determine how his characters move through the story. Sometimes it makes more sense to him to use thematic elements—for example, in *Origin* (2017), the story moves from the world of art (the Guggenheim Museum) to the world of technology (the Supercomputing Center). Occasionally, a location can even provide answers to plotting problems. While writing one of the final scenes of *Origin*, he noticed a deadly staircase in Sagrada Familia that inspired him to imagine someone dying there.

As you're falling madly in love with your setting, however, remember not to put too much location detail into your writing, or you risk boring your audience. Readers are interested in your characters and plot, so

information about your world is best conveyed through a character's sensory experience or through action.

### LEARN MORE

Selecting an exciting location is a key heavy lifter. For advice on creating and describing settings, read *Writing Vivid Settings: Professional Techniques for Fiction Authors* (2015) by Rayne Hall, or *A Writer's Guide to Active Setting* (2016) by Mary Buckham. Both books provide insight into the process of choosing and rendering your world.

For inspiration, go online and visit [The Book Trail](#), which bills itself as a "Literary Travel Agency." This website provides a search feature so you can match your next travel destination with a book, or find a book to inspire your next adventure. They provide maps and links for learning more about locations from popular novels. Check out the book trail for [Origin](#), which can be used as an itinerary for a "Dan Brown-inspired tour of Spain."

### WRITING EXERCISES

Below is a list of locations. Select three—or make up three of your own—and write a paragraph describing each one. Try to write from the point of view of a particular character you might find in that setting, and let the details

emerge from the character's sensory experience or action. Mix predictable details with those that will surprise the reader.

- A train station
- An oil spill on the ocean
- The top of a skyscraper
- A busy restaurant
- A wildlife preserve
- An office
- A junkyard for old ships
- A sniper's lair

### For Your Novel

In your notebook, mark a page for "Setting" and answer the following questions: If you could go anywhere on a fantasy vacation right now, where would you go? If you could start a whole new career, what would you do? If you could spend a day with someone whose job is totally mysterious or fascinating to you, who would it be? If you could take a tour of any building in the world, which one would you visit? What's your favorite landscape? Make this list as long or short as you like. If you've already chosen your topic, create a master list here of the most important elements of the setting. Make sure you leave blank space on the page. You will continue to add details to this list during later sections of the course.

Label a new page in your notebook "World." Go back to the "Topics" and "Moral Gray Area" pages in your notebook (from the assignments

in Chapter 3: Finding the Idea). Using the topics that magnetize you right now, the moral gray area that interests you most, and the setting you most prefer (from the assignment above), write a one-page description of your world. Pretend you're explaining it to a good friend, someone who will understand why you're so excited about it.

Select an important location from your novel. This could be anything—a public building, a business, a famous landmark, a landscape, or someone's house. Now choose two characters from the list below and write a short paragraph describing how they might react to the setting. Explore different points of view of your chosen place.

- A five-year-old
- A homeless woman
- A real estate agent
- A police officer
- A tourist
- A college student visiting a friend
- An elderly couple looking for a café

Choose ten places or elements of your setting and write them on index cards or slips of paper. Organize them according to how you think a story should unfold at those locations. Would it make more sense for your characters to move from one theme to another (e.g. from religious buildings to scientific ones)? What's the most efficient way to organize them? Would a random route be more interesting?



MASTERCLASS

## CHAPTER FIVE CREATING HEROES AND VILLAINS

I

DAN BROWN

“Create a worthy opponent. The villain will be the catalyst for everything.”



# CREATING HEROES AND VILLAINS

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Choose a Hero That is Suited to Your World*

*Start With Your Villain*

*Give Villains Relatable Motivations*

*Introduce Villains With a Bang*

*Give Your Heroes Flaws to Make Them Human*

*Put Yourself Into Your Heroes*

*Create Stakes That Matter to Your Hero*

*You Can Be Easy On Your Villain, Not Your Hero*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

Heroes don't have to be perfect specimens of bravery and strength. In fact, those protagonists tend to be boring. Great heroes emerge from the trials they encounter.

Because these trials will define your hero, it's a good idea to develop your villain first, as the villain's motivations will create the crisis for your hero. While Dan recommends introducing a villain with a bang—sending your reader a clear message that this character is malicious—he also urges you to spend time crafting a thoughtful character. In particular, every villain needs to have his own morality. If a villain spends part of the novel killing people, you need to give him or her believable reasons for doing so. Make the reader understand exactly what desperation or belief has driven him to it. To elevate your heroes, you must give them flaws as well. The villain is not the only one standing in your hero's way; a hero's personality can just as easily interfere with his quest.

It doesn't matter what the stakes are in your novel, but they must matter to your protagonist. Your hero doesn't have to save the world—perhaps he saves his own family from an

eviction, or he fights to keep his business from going bankrupt. As long as you establish what's important to your hero—ideally, something that your audience can relate to—and help the reader imagine what might happen if the hero loses that important thing, then you can create high stakes in any novel.

Develop a hero who reflects your interests. You're going to be spending a lot of time with this character, so the rule from Chapter 3: Finding the Idea—"write what you want to know"—applies here as well. Don't be afraid to invest your hero with familiar qualities, but prioritize your passions and make sure that both villain and hero emerge from the setting and topics you've developed so far. Your characters don't need to belong to the world per se, but they should have skills that will allow them to function in your setting. You've chosen to set your novel on the moon? Then make sure your hero has a space suit or learns how to use one.

## LEARN MORE

In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Joseph Campbell argues that all heroic stories share an underlying structure, which he calls a "monomyth." Most thrillers are a

variation of Campbell's monomyth. They tell the story of a hero who leaves the comfortable, known world and ventures into the dangerous unknown, often at great risk to his life, in order to bring benefit to humanity. As such, thrillers hearken back to myths that span all cultures and epochs. Scan through Wikipedia's lists of [Heroes from World Cultures](#) and [Heroines in Folklore](#) and mark those that appeal to you most. Keep a list of those heroes in your notebook.

For an in-depth discussion on crafting great characters, check out Robert McKee's immensely useful manual *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997). McKee argues that when creating motivations for heroes and villains, a key principle to remember is that making a decision between good and evil is never really a choice. All humans will choose good *as they see it*. You must elaborate why your villain is choosing his own good (which to readers appears evil). This is where your moral gray area becomes important. In *Inferno* (2013), the moral gray area is the question of overpopulation. Bertrand Zobrist creates a virus that will wipe out most of the earth's population, but he is doing it to save the planet. His flaw is that he thinks he's found an answer to the moral gray area (saving a tiny minority of humans is better than saving none), leaving Langdon in a position to defend the other side of that argument (that all humanity is worth saving).

In his book *Super Structure: The Key to Unleashing the Power of Story* (2015), James Scott Bell advises a useful way to think about creating stakes for your story: all stakes, no matter what kind of novel you're writing, should involve death. This can happen physically (the hero's life is in danger), psychologically (the

hero stands to lose his identity or a vital aspect of his soul), or circumstantially (some aspect of the hero's life will be lost forever—a career, a marriage, a family, etc.). When you're designing your hero's main conflict, ask yourself which kind of death your hero is going to confront.

Sometimes a moral gray area turns a hero into a villain. In fiction, this is known as an anti-hero. Turn to these novels and television shows for some recent popular examples of anti-heroes, or check out TVTropes [extensive list](#).

- Tom Ripley of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) by Patricia Highsmith
- Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* (1999)
- Walter White of *Breaking Bad* (2008)
- Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2008) by Stieg Larsson
- Amy Dunne of *Gone Girl* (2012) by Gillian Flynn

Watch *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and observe how the character of Indiana Jones is revealed. Which character traits are shown first? Which ones come later? What motivates Jones in his quest?

#### WRITING EXERCISES

Because he grew up on a prep school campus, all of Dan's real-life heroes were teachers, so in choosing a hero for his novels, it felt natural to create a professor. Make a list of your real-life heroes and list the qualities they possess. What challenges did they face that made them heroic? Which qualities did they exhibit to face those challenges? In looking at this list, do you see any common themes emerging? Which character tugs most at your heart? Write a page describing one of your heroes.

Below are six characters. Pick one and write a short narrative from the point of view of that character as he or she seeks to justify their actions. Pretend that they are explaining themselves to someone they care about. Don't edit too much, just free write and let the character speak.

- A hit man who has just killed a young girl
- A corporate executive who has just cheated on his or her spouse
- A prison guard who has nearly beat an inmate to death
- A teenage boy who has gone on a shooting rampage
- A police officer who has shot a woman in her backyard
- The villain from your novel-in-progress (if you have one)

### For Your Novel

Look at the "World" page in your notebook from the assignment in Chapter 4: Choosing Locations. Based on the setting you described and the moral gray area you established, begin to develop your hero and villain. Who would it make sense for them to be? Consider these specifics for each character:

- What is their name?
- What is their gender?
- How old are they?
- What do they look like?
- What is their mood like on any given day?
- How do they feel about the opinions of others?
- Where did they grow up and go to school?
- What are their parents like?
- Do they have siblings?
- Are they married or single?
- What's their favorite thing to do?

- What do they hate doing?
- Have they ever been passionately in love?
- Are they healthy?
- What was their most traumatic moment in life?
- What matters to them more than anything in the world?

Next, consider:

- What aspects of your hero can be reflected through your villain?
- What aspects of your villain's personality and life could create relatable motivations for what they do in your novel?

Imagine a scene with your hero and ask yourself: What is the worst thing that can happen to him? Then go further and ask: How can I make it even worse? Write down the answers in your notebook. This is an exercise in exploration, so let your imagination run wild.

You should begin considering and refining your story's sole dramatic question as soon as you've got a main character, because the question will almost always involve the hero. It should be a simple concept that reflects the highest stakes for your protagonist: Will Jason Bourne find his identity? Will Robert Langdon find the virus? (Remember, it doesn't matter what those stakes are, as long as they're deeply important to your main character.) What is your story's sole dramatic question? If you don't have one, brainstorm a list of questions and spend some time refining them until you find the most important one.



## CHAPTER SIX UNIVERSAL CHARACTER TOOLS

I

DAN BROWN

“As you move forward and start to populate your world with characters, choose characters that complement your hero, that have something else to bring.”





# UNIVERSAL CHARACTER TOOLS

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Create Secondary Characters That Complement Your Hero*

*Let Plot Dictate Character*

*Know What Your Characters Want*

*Limit the Number of Characters*

*Make Important Characters Easy to Remember*

*Give Characters Opposing Ideas*

*Establish History Between Your Characters*

*Reveal Character Through Internal Monologue*

*Help Your Characters Be Smarter Than You Are*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

While the villain will define the forces that antagonize your hero, a sidekick will help the reader understand the hero's strengths and motivations, so it's wise to choose a traveling companion who will complement your hero. This person can be a mentor or a friend, a romantic interest or a helper of some kind. These secondary characters serve the vital functions of assisting the hero with alternate skill sets, giving the hero a sounding board or emotional support, getting themselves into trouble so that the hero must rescue them, and even providing comic relief.

Some of the best sidekicks in literature are oppositional and will even undermine the protagonist. Think of Dr. Watson chastising Sherlock Holmes for his drug use. Giving secondary characters opposing points of view allows you to explore your subjects, settings, and moral gray areas from a wider variety of perspectives, which sustains complexity and keeps the reader interested. Consider letting your characters have pre-existing histories. This creates space for the reader to grow curious and even generate assumptions about their relationship. Most

of all, have fun with your sidekick. You'll be spending almost as much time with them as you will with your hero.

One way to create intimacy with your reader—and to get them to care about your main character—is to use internal monologue. This means letting the reader see a character's thoughts as they happen, which exposes that person's motivations, opinions, and personality. Internal monologue not only reveals character, it's a neat way to convey information about your setting, events, and other characters. Dan prefers using this combo technique, which is the heavy lifter of this chapter.

Don't worry about creating your secondary characters up front—it can be overwhelming. Just focus on the things you need in the moment, and let yourself develop characters as you go along. Many times, they will emerge during the writing of a novel. Dan's need to trap Langdon in the Louvre in *The Da Vinci Code* led him to the creation of Bezu Fache, a police chief who suspects that Langdon is a murderer. When these types of characters evolve, you'll get to know them as you proceed.

When trying to sustain a reader's attention, it's particularly important to keep the number of characters low and to develop only those characters who are relevant to the storyline. When you develop a new character, you don't need to know everything about them right away, but you do need to understand what they want. This isn't something you have to tell the reader, but you should know it yourself. It will help you plot that character's actions.

When creating important characters that the reader is going to meet more than once, be sure that they're memorable in some way. Try to give each one a quality that can be used later to help readers recall who they are. This could be a title like "chief of police" or a physical attribute like "ginger-haired." And don't be afraid to create characters you know nothing about. It's perfectly fine if a character is smarter than you or knows more about a specialized topic than you do. Research what that character would be like. Go out and meet someone like him or her and begin to create a character based on that.

#### LEARN MORE

[The Complete Guide to Interior Monologue](#) from Novel Writing Help gives an excellent breakdown of interior monologue, as does "Call Me Ishmael: Point of View, Pt. 1" from Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft, Sixth Edition* (2003).

"Authorial distance" is the term used to describe how close the reader feels to the characters in a story. For tips on using authorial distance to make your characters likeable (or not), read this [Writer's Digest article](#) and check out "Assorted Liars: Point of View, Pt. 2" in

Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft, Sixth Edition* (2003).

Take a closer look at the variety of ways you can use inner monologue to elucidate setting, character, and action by reading these examples from Dan's novel, *The Lost Symbol* (2009):

- Chapter 3: Robert Langdon's observation of Washington D.C. from the back of a Town Car sets a tone for the novel and echoes his growing worry about a friend.
- Chapter 21: Langdon uses his view of the Apotheosis of Washington to navigate a tricky conversation with the Director of the CIA's Office of Security, Inoue Sato.
- Chapter 46: The historical connection between the Library of Congress and the Capitol Building is made real when Langdon takes an underground tunnel between the locations to escape the CIA.
- Chapter 78: Dan takes the reader inside the George Washington Masonic Memorial and, using dramatic irony, gives an interior monologue for CIA Agent Simkins that shows his ignorance of the secrets that Langdon and his sidekick, Katherine Solomon, are chasing.
- Chapter 111: The reader learns about the enigmatic Peter Solomon through his slide show presentation of the Smithsonian Institution—and through Langdon's appreciation of it.

The editors at Writers Digest have written a fantastic handbook for authors: *Creating Characters: The Complete Guide to Populating Your Fiction* (2014). It discusses heroes, villains, and secondary characters, and it provides excellent advice for handling everything from interior monologue to story arcs. For a deeper look at character development in all types of fiction, read David Corbett's thoughtful guide *The Art*

*of Character: Creating Memorable Characters for Fiction, Film, and TV* (2013).

Take a look at the following stories or movies to sample a variety of sidekicks in storytelling:

- *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) by Dan Brown. Although Sophie Neveu is literally the Holy Grail of sidekicks, she's in line with Dan's preference for giving Langdon a brilliant and talented female companion. The sidekick's skill set is often wildly different from Langdon's, but without her they wouldn't be able to solve their problems. The fact that she's usually plucky and beautiful provides romantic interest as well.
- *Sahara* (1992) by Clive Cussler. Al Giordino, the reliable, witty, teasing best friend in the Dirk Pitt Adventure series, shows how a sidekick can be practically a twin to the protagonist.
- *A Great Deliverance* (1988) by Elizabeth George. This sprawling detective series investigates the relationship between Detective Inspector Thomas Lynley and his sidekick, Sergeant Barbara Havers, and provides an example of a situation where the sidekick is so interesting that she becomes a main character herself.
- *Casablanca* (1942). Rick spends just about as much time on screen with his confidante Sam as he does with his beloved Ilsa. Rick and Sam share a deep bond of trust. As such, Sam functions as a conscience and a heart for a man who has lost his.
- *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986). Ferris's best friend, Cameron Frye, is a classic example of the sidekick who motivates the hero's quest. Ferris might like to take advantage of Cameron's father's car, but he drags his depressed friend out for a day of fun hoping to dispel his mood.

## WRITING EXERCISES

Go to a public place where you can observe other people. Choose one person and imagine a few character details for them. What's their name? What mood are they in? Why are they there? Write a one-page, interior monologue for them that reveals what they're thinking. Show their thoughts, but also show the world around them and how they interact with that world. Try to develop an inner monologue that is at odds with the world around them or with the way they appear to be.

### For Your Novel

Every time you create a new character, create a page in your notebook for a character bio. Use the questions below to flesh out each person. When you discover new qualities about your characters during the writing of your novel, go back to the bios and make notes of the qualities. It's also good practice to make notes of significant events that happen to each character. These bios will become an invaluable reference tool for you as your story develops.

Not every hero needs a sidekick, but if yours has or is looking for one, begin developing one now. Consider especially how they will complement your hero.

- What new perspective will your sidekick bring to the story? How is this different from the hero's point of view?
- What skills does your hero need? Can the sidekick provide those skills?
- What is sidekick's name?
- What is their gender?
- How old are they?
- What do they look like?
- What is their mood like on any given day?

- How do they feel about the opinions of others?
- Where did they grow up and go to school?
- What are their parents like? Do they have siblings?
- Are they married or single?
- What's their favorite thing to do?
- What do they hate doing?
- Have they ever been passionately in love?
- Are they healthy?
- What was their most traumatic moment in life?
- What matters to them more than anything in the world?

Explore how your hero and sidekick relate to one another. Write a page of dialogue between the hero and sidekick about any of the following topics: religion, drugs, a political scandal, a scientific breakthrough, a robot, a famous historical person, a reality TV show, adultery, a childhood memory, a favorite article of clothing.

Select a scene from your novel that involves your hero or villain. Underline sections of internal monologue. Does it feel like you have too much? Rewrite the scene, cutting out some of the underlined passages. If there is not enough monologue, experiment with adding some of your character's perceptions until you find a balance.

If you haven't done so already, create a bio for each of your characters. On a separate sheet of paper, write a description of the character and note any significant events that happen to them in the story. These bios will be an invaluable reference tool for you during the writing and editing of your novel.

Choose one of your characters and write a one-page description of them. Use the following tips to flesh out your description:

- Instead of writing a plain, physical description, try viewing the character through a creative lens. For example, does she have a nickname? What did she do to earn it? Does it refer to her appearance? Her attitude? How does she feel about it?
- Choose one event from your character's past and elaborate on that. For example, your hero has a back injury from an accident while he was in the navy. Does he move differently now? Do people treat him differently? What are the psychological repercussions of the accident?
- Choose a trait in your character and list the ways that it's expressed. If your sidekick is nervous, he might bounce his knee when he's sitting, pluck at his sleeves, or startle easily.
- What space has your character created for themselves? This can be offstage: a bedroom, an expensive car with all the right gadgets, the perfectly-stocked kitchen, a private office. Describe your character in that space.



MASTERCLASS

CHAPTER SEVEN  
CHARACTER CASE STUDY:  
*THE DA VINCI CODE*

I

DAN BROWN

“Some of the most fun you’re going to have as a  
thriller writer is misdirecting your reader.”





# CHARACTER CASE STUDY: THE DA VINCI CODE

## SUBCHAPTERS

*The Muscle*

*The Puppet Master*

*The Conspiracy Theorist*

*The Red Herring*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

“What is their purpose?” This is probably the most important question you can ask of any character in your novel, so it’s good practice to look at your character’s main functions in your novel and determine how well they’re fulfilling their roles.

Dan’s characters may fit into types, but they are also born of needs that emerge during plot development. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Silas was created to put Langdon in jeopardy. Leigh Teabing evolved to convey information about a conspiracy—facts that couldn’t have come from Langdon without making him seem irrational. Sophie Neveu fulfilled Dan’s need to help Langdon decipher the clues he was discovering.

Creating physical danger for your characters is an excellent way to raise the stakes, but remember to give your villains the same complexity of motivation as your heroes. One way to do this is with a moral gray area: Silas is devout and virtuous, yet he goes to ever greater extremes for his beliefs, which forces him to make moral compromises. Dan’s novels often feature more than one villain. The first one is the “muscle,” but behind him lies the real villain—the “puppet master”—who is motivating the muscle’s actions. When Dan reveals who the puppet

master is, we usually discover that this person, too, resides in a moral gray area of their own.

Another powerful way to engage a reader’s interest is to hint at explanations that may not be true. This “red herring” technique involves getting the reader to believe a false conclusion about the plot. Done well, the reader will feel surprised by the truth and will enjoy the misdirection, having learned something useful about the setting or the characters along the way.

## LEARN MORE

Character synopsis for *The Da Vinci Code* (2003):

- Robert Langdon, the story’s hero, is a Harvard professor who teaches in the fictional field of Symbolology. He loves to swim, wears Harris tweed, suffers from claustrophobia, and has an eidetic memory. Dan [cites Joseph Campbell](#) as his inspiration for Langdon’s character. Langdon gets involved in this story when a murdered colleague writes Langdon’s name in blood before he dies.
- Silas, the novel’s “muscle,” is a forty-something numerary of Opus Dei, a Catholic organization. He is an albino who practices self-mortification. A brutal childhood led him to seek refuge with Bishop Aringarosa.
- “The Teacher” is the story’s “puppet master.” In the book, this person is simply called “The

Teacher” and communicates with Bishop Aringarosa and Silas through mysterious phone calls.

- Sir Leigh Teabing, the “conspiracy theorist,” is a scholar who has spent his whole life researching the Holy Grail. Obsessive, brilliant, and extremely wealthy, he lives in a chateau outside of Paris.
- Bishop Manuel Aringarosa, the story’s “red herring,” is the head of Opus Dei. He believes the Pope is going to withdraw his support for Opus Dei, but the Teacher has offered him a valuable artifact that may change the Pope’s mind. Aringarosa will do anything to get this artifact.
- Sophie Neveu Saint-Clair, the “sidekick,” is a cryptographer with the French National Police. She helps Langdon solve the clues that Sophie’s grandfather, Jacques Saunière, has left for her to find.
- Jacques Saunière is a curator of the Louvre and a secret-keeping member of the Priory of Sion. Saunière is a “catalyst,” as his murder sets the events of the book in motion.

Understanding common character types is a good launching point for populating any story. Read Screencraft’s [thorough list](#) of archetypal villains for help clarifying your own antagonist, and check out their [list of popular character types](#) for inspiration on building your supporting cast.

For a smart overview of character building—as well as a look at different character “types” and how to handle their story arcs over the course of a novel—read Orson Scott Card’s helpful book: *Characters & Viewpoint* (2010).

Each of Dan’s books contain red herrings. Take a look at the following to sample a variety of ways that you can misdirect your reader:

- Greg Hale in *Digital Fortress* (1998)
- Marjorie Tench and Lawrence Ekstrom in *Deception Point* (2001)
- Maximilian Kohler in *Angels and Demons* (2000)
- Bishop Aringarosa in *The Da Vinci Code* (2003)

There are two basic rules to keep in mind when creating red herrings. First, don’t trick your reader by conveniently forgetting to tell them essential information. A red herring is going to feel like a lie unless you can give it *plausibility* and *perspective*. For example, you believe a man is dangerous because he escaped from prison, where he’d been jailed for double homicide. Slowly, you learn that this man killed your parents, and that he is chasing you to finish the job. Since you’re a child, all the adults in your life are trying to protect you by withholding information about the killer. The true dangers you face may be even worse than you think. When you finally confront the man, you learn that he isn’t a killer at all but in fact escaped from prison to find the real killer. This red herring—found in J.K. Rowling’s *The Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999)—works because the child’s perspective (Harry Potter’s) is naturally limited by media distortion, social misinformation, and the fact that he’s a child. It’s entirely plausible that Harry would have believed what he did, because of his perspective. His relief and amazement at discovering that the supposed killer (Sirius Black) is actually his godfather becomes *the reader’s* delight as well. Second, the red herring should be a natural extension of the story. Don’t go out of your way to create a red herring for the sole purpose of misleading your reader; rather, allow the events of the story to take your protagonist down a false path. Watch this Writer’s Digest’s [video tutorial](#) for more information on creating red herrings.

## WRITING EXERCISES

**For Your Novel**

In your notebook, make a thorough list of your characters so far, leaving space beside each entry. Next to each name, describe the main purpose of the character in the story. If the purpose seems weak, consider how to change it (or consider discarding that character).

Begin developing the relationship between your hero and villain. Write one page in your notebook describing how your hero and villain first encounter each other. Do they meet in person? Does one of them hear about the other? Do they have a past? What has triggered their feelings for each other? Come up with numerous scenarios until you find one that feels right.

Think of any of the places in your story where you're struggling to accomplish something. For example, do you want someone to cast suspicion on your hero at a critical moment? Does your villain need help accomplishing something? Come up with a list of people who could help your characters in the situations you're struggling with. Give each invented person a brief identity and describe their physical characteristics.

Take a closer look at your villain(s) with the following exercises.

- Pretend your villain is on trial. Write a page from the villain's point of view. How would he/she explain their actions to a jury?
- Write a paragraph from the point of view of the villain's mother. How would she explain her child's action?
- List the ways that the villain surprises the hero. Could the villain do better?

Find places to put some secret fun into your story. Bishop Aringarosa (whose name literally means "red herring" in Italian) was one of Dan's ways of adding fun. Word plays aren't the only tool for doing this: Dan's book *Deception Point* (2001) had a hidden cypher in it, as did *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). The latter pointed to a secret code that sits on CIA Headquarters grounds that even the Agency hasn't been able to solve. See this [Wired article](#) for more detail.

Footage from *The Da Vinci Code* courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

## CHAPTER EIGHT RESEARCH, PART 1

I

DAN BROWN

“Research, as a first step, will get you excited. It will give you ideas. And it will help you choose a world, which is really the first thing you need to do.”





# RESEARCH, PART 1

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Research to Find Your World*

*Finding Inspiring Elements of Your World*

*Seek Out Specialists*

*Prepare Questions for Specialists in Advance*

*Absorb as Much as You Can on Location*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

Whether you're writing what you know or pursuing a fresh passion, research is a critical tool for developing the world of your novel. What you learn during research will allow you to immerse your reader fully in your setting. It will guide you in developing your characters, the novel's moral gray area, and even the fundamental conflict of your story.

For those with new topics, the preliminary stage of research is generally exploratory and involves reading anything that interests you. As you go deeper, you'll find your research becoming more focused. You'll begin asking questions about particular locations, histories, or scenarios that involve your subject matter. At this point, your interests will not only guide your choice of materials, they will also help you begin structuring your novel.

Although reading is an invaluable research tool, it is seldom enough by itself. At some point it will be necessary to reach out to others. Talking to people about their passions can offer perspectives that you won't find in books, and it can transmit an enthusiasm and authenticity that will come through in your writing. Meeting people in person may also inspire ideas for your characters. Don't expect

a specialist to train you from scratch. Make sure you've done research first and prepared thoughtful questions for your interview subject. It shows respect for their time and allows you to go deeper with them. Dan has made some surprising connections interviewing specialists, so don't be afraid to ask about places where their area of expertise may overlap with the world of your novel—even if the two subjects don't seem related. The specialist may reveal interesting connections for you.

If you can, visit locations that interest you. Dan goes to places first without any recording devices, pen, or paper. He simply allows himself to absorb the space and to feel what it's like being there. He makes mental notes of the elements that strike him most. Only later does he return with his notebooks and camera. The second visit is to collect as much information as possible so he can refer back to it while he's writing his book.

## LEARN MORE

For an essential example of deftly blending research into story, read Martin Cruz Smith's *Gorky Park* (1981). From the first chapter, you'll see Smith's masterful handling of setting, characterization, and plot. The novel was one of the first "literary" thrillers; it fused politics,



history, and social realism into a novel about an unsolved crime. It also set a high bar for thriller writers to deliver not just action and plot, but the kind of information and insights that you normally find in non-fiction. Smith researched a difficult subject—life in the USSR during the Cold War—by visiting the country, but he relied most heavily on the advice of Russian expats. After *Gorky Park* was published, Smith was banned from the country but managed to get around that [in clever ways](#) to continue working on his series. Read this [BookPage interview](#) for an interesting account of his research at the Chernobyl disaster site.

Raymond Chandler described thrillers as “an extension of the fairy tale...melodrama so embellished as to create the illusion that the story being told, however unlikely, could be true.” Indeed, like Dan, thriller authors often embellish their tales with hefty doses of non-fiction. Some authors even become well-known for their research techniques. Frederick Forsyth wrote *The Day of the Jackal* (1971) approaching his subject matter as a journalist would, by interviewing people and hunting down sources. Tom Clancy read hundreds of books, practiced ROTC war games, and doggedly interviewed submariners for months in order to write *The Hunt for Red October* (1984). Read any of the books on this list to study the ways that a world can feature heavily in a novel and still provide the action and adventure of a thriller.

*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963)

John Le Carré

*The Day of the Jackal* (1971) by Frederick Forsyth

*The Hunt for Red October* (1984) by Tom Clancy

*House of Cards* (1989) by Michael Dobbs

*Jurassic Park* (1990) by Michael Crichton

*Body of Evidence* (1991) by Patricia Cornwell

*The Firm* (1991) by John Grisham

*Harvest* (1996) by Tess Gerritsen

*The Woman in Cabin 10* (2016) by Ruth Ware

*Shining City* (2017) by Tom Rosenstiel

## WRITING EXERCISES

Visit a location you’ve never been to before—either an actual place from a setting you’ve chosen or simply a place near you that you find interesting. When you first arrive at the location, don’t record or photograph or write anything down, just spend some time absorbing it through your senses. Pay attention to the things that strike you most. Go home later and write a description of the place. Remember to include the sensory details—what it felt and smelled and sounded like.

## For Your Novel

Create a new page in your notebook titled “Research Topics.” Choose three topics or elements of your setting from the “World” page in your notebook (from the assignment in Chapter 4: Choosing Locations). Write these topics on the “Research Topics” page. Beneath each topic, write down specific areas that interest you. For example, your novel takes place in a hospital, and your protagonist is a surgical resident. Subtopics might include: performing surgery, surgical tools, hospital floor plans, doctor’s schedules. Write down anything you want to know more about.

Consider the following points about your world and jot down some ideas about how they might relate to your story. Add any significant finds to the “Research Topics” page above.

- A historical event related to your world
- An artist, poet, or writer related to your theme
- A clothing style
- Landscape
- A branch of science
- A religious or spiritual belief
- Physical locations in that world

Sometimes the physical setting of a novel is relatively unimportant. Perhaps your characters live in a town you haven't even bothered to name, or your entire novel takes place in a single room. The people of your novel are your "world." Who they are, what they do, and how they interact is the focus of your interest (and will be for your reader). In this case, treat your characters as research interests and begin investigating their lives just as you would any topic. Perhaps a character is a recovering alcoholic who works at a steel mill. He may never go to the mill during the novel, but he

may talk about it, and it will inform who he is. Investigate the types of jobs he might have done at the mill, what dangers he might have faced, and what his job was like. Go to an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting and get a feel for what it takes to beat an addiction. Use the following questions to generate research topics on each character.

- Where does the character live? Does he/she have a family?
- Where does the character work? How do they feel about their job?
- What kinds of friends and social life does this person have?
- How much vacation time does this character have, and where does he/she go to unwind?
- Is this character religious? Does he/she feel strongly about it?
- What interests this character most of all in the world? And how does he/she pursue this interest?



# RESEARCH, PART 2

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Research Exhaustively to Find Connections*

*Don't Focus on Organization Too Early*

*If It Doesn't Serve Your Story, Don't Use It*

*Be Fair With Your Creative License*

*Don't Let Research Become Procrastination*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

A lot of the fun in thrillers comes from making connections between seemingly unrelated topics. Dan's novel, *Origin* (2017), draws religion, art, and the theory of evolution together. While researching, he found intriguing points of overlap between these topics. The connections he made helped him flesh out his world more vividly. They also educate and inspire readers. Connections like these do not happen naturally. In fact, they often take a lot of work. The more research material you have, the higher your chances will be of finding those connections, so dig deep and read everything you can.

The research you do at the start of your project does not have to be structured. You're not putting in grueling hours at the library to finish your Ph.D., you're looking for inspiration, so follow your interests no matter where they take you. This research will build your understanding of your world and your themes, which will inform the decisions you make about characters and plot. If you're like Dan, then 90 percent of your research won't make it into your novel, but it will give you a strong grasp of your material so that you can write with confidence. Be prudent in choosing what to put into the novel

itself, and remember Dan's rule of thumb: if it doesn't serve the story, don't use it. Research materials are like money in the bank—use what you need now and save the rest for the future.

Designing your themes and the world of your story means relying on facts. For most thriller writers, your novel will end up being a blend of fact and fiction. You should be fair when taking liberties with the nonfiction elements of your book and try to keep those elements as true as possible. Readers may already know the setting you're describing and may recognize when you alter the real world in any way. If you must take creative license and change something, do it sparingly.

If a whole new vein of interest opens up during your research, plunge right in and gather as much information as you can, but be aware that research can become procrastination. It can be fun to learn, especially when you're studying a topic that thrills you. There may come a point when you get lost in your research. Remember that you don't need to know everything, you just need to know enough to get started. You'll continue doing research as you work on the novel, so begin writing as soon as you can.

## LEARN MORE

Thanks to the internet, it has never been easier to educate yourself. If you're still in the process of seeking inspiration for your setting, check out the CIA's [World Factbook](#) which provides comprehensive information for almost every country on earth. [National Geographic](#) and [Cultural Jambalaya](#) have excellent photographic inspiration on world locales. Browse through your local news station or go to [Foreign Policy](#), a current affairs website that may trigger big ideas.

In the early stages, research is about inspiration, but it's also about creating images in your mind that will become the groundwork for characters and scenes later. The internet has exceptional tools for finding and organizing images to inspire you. Use [Pinterest](#) to build image boards and create visual themes for each character or scene. Search [Instagram](#) by place names or any other visual topic you'd like to explore. [Google Street View](#) will take you all over the world, and then can take you beyond the "street view"—now they have galleries for everything: museums, arenas, natural wonders, and world landmarks. Once you get into your novel and your research needs become more specific, you'll probably want to start talking to specialists, but for smaller scene details, try asking questions on [Quora](#) or [Reddit](#). You can find almost anything on [YouTube](#). Just remember to fact-check every source. Start with [The 5 Best Unbiased Fact-Checking Sites for Finding the Truth](#).

In any phase of novel-writing, your local library will be a boon. Whether large or small, most libraries have an inter-library loan policy so that they can borrow materials from larger ones. Many libraries will offer online services as well, which can get you access to more specialized features like medical and academic journals. (Use the "[Find Your Local Public Library](#)" search feature at the Digital Public Library of America.) State libraries also have vast collections; you can search for yours on [this list](#). The Library of Congress has a remarkable [digital collection](#) and an excellent [information page](#) for those who plan to visit in person. Consider paying for access to a university or an independent library, or call them to find out if they're open to the public. The Internet Archive's [Open Library](#) and [Project Gutenberg](#) have tens of thousands of free titles online.

Consider downloading a research-organizing tool like [Evernote](#) or [Google Keep](#). One of the great benefits of most novel-writing software is that it can help you store and organize your research materials. For that, check out [Scrivener](#) or [Dramatica](#), which both have excellent tools for handling research.

## WRITING EXERCISES

## For Your Novel

Go to your "Research Topics" page from the assignment in Chapter 8: Research, Part 1. Determine which topics are most important in developing the setting and story of your novel. Write a list of all the topics in order from most important to least.



Now that you've identified and prioritized your main topics, create a research agenda. This doesn't have to be set in stone—always allow yourself to go off course when the inspiration strikes—but it can be extremely helpful to have a plan. Use a calendar to set aside time for research and include the following considerations:

- How many hours per week will you devote to this work?
- Do you have the tools you'll need—computer, notebooks, recording devices, cameras?
- Will you be researching at a library or other building?
- Do you need to speak to specialists?
- Do you have the ability to travel to do research?

On a page in your notebook labeled "Time," write down the time period in which your novel takes place. No matter if it's historical or modern-day, try to be specific with the year in which your story occurs. Having a concrete time period can guide your research. Use this page to brainstorm ideas for research topics related to time. Consider the items below:

- What season is your novel set in? What is the weather like?
- What are the elements of your setting like during this time? For example, was that business closed 15 years ago? Did that street have a different name then? Was that statue erected before your characters arrived there?
- Does your novel center around a major world event—e.g. war, natural disaster? How does this limit or define your time frame?
- What cultural details belong to this time? Consider music, literature, entertainment, clothing styles, food trends, lifestyle trends, and big national events or crises that shape public sentiments.

CHAPTER TEN  
BUILDING A STORY FROM  
THE GROUND UP

I

DAN BROWN

"I can't tell you what your idea should be, but I'm  
hoping to give you the tools to turn your  
idea into a thriller."



# BUILDING A STORY FROM THE GROUND UP

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Select the World and Find the Moral Gray Area*

*Create the Hero*

*Create the Villain*

*Check for the Three C's*

*Set the Stage*

*Write the Finale First*

*Navigate the Middle Muddle*

*Develop the Supporting Characters*

*Turn Up the Tension*

*Build the Obstacles*

*Remind the Reader of the Stakes*

*Motivate the Character to the Next Location*

*Wrap It Up*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

Plotting your novel can be an enormous challenge. You've had some time to begin developing your world and your characters, your moral gray area, and the three C's, and now you face the daunting task of putting it all together into a coherent story—and making it interesting enough to get a reader hooked.

The beginning of your novel has to accomplish a lot. It must introduce the hero, the villain, and the world of the story, as well as the story's sole dramatic question, and it must do this with enough energy to grab your reader's interest right away. A prologue can be useful for seizing the reader's attention. Dan creates very short prologues that showcase his villains—in *Inferno* and *The Lost Symbol*, for example—or prologues that reveal a murderous or violent act that catalyzes the story—in *The Da Vinci Code* and

*Angels & Demons*. This introduces danger right away and raises immediate questions for the reader.

Often, tension evaporates in the middle of a novel, so it's a good idea to write your ending first. It may not be perfect, and you can always change it later, but it's useful to know the climax to which your characters are headed. Having that destination will help you stay focused during the "middle muddle." While it may seem daunting to figure out the ending so early, just return to your sole dramatic question, which already has your ending hidden within it. For example, if your question is: Will Ahab catch the whale? Then your story's finale will be the moment when he does.

Your job during the middle of the story is to make the hero's quest as difficult as possible so that at every moment it seems less likely

that the hero will triumph. You must raise the stakes along the way and create obstacles of ever-increasing intensity while keeping your eye firmly fixed on your conclusion. Dan's sample story—a thriller about a vintner fighting a big corporation for water rights—uses the following techniques to help keep conflict going throughout the middle section:

- Create secondary characters who bring new tensions to the story. The vintner's helper is a female attorney. She may also become a romantic interest, and this would be the place to develop that subplot.
- Introduce new problems. Whatever situation your hero is facing at the start of the middle section should become worse. The vintner's struggle for water rights goes from being a legal issue to being one of physical danger.
- Give a character a complicated history or situation. The attorney must face down the lead counsel for the corporation, and that counsel also happens to be her ex-husband.
- Create obstacles for your hero. The vintner discovers the existence of a document that could destroy the corporation, but he can't get the document.
- Complicate things. The hero finds the documents and discovers something much worse about the corporation.
- Keep reminding the reader of the stakes. Switch back and forth between your hero and villain, and continue showing glimpses of how the struggle for water rights has a concrete impact on the hero—and even on his community.
- Find ways to keep your protagonist moving from one location to another. If you know you want to use a certain place in a scene, find a way to get the character there.

In satisfying stories, the hero wins, but ultimately your ending will depend upon your own morality. Whatever it is, the ending should fit the story. The hero should have earned his success, and the villain's punishment should fit the crime.

#### LEARN MORE

For more advice on the particular challenges of each phase of novel writing, read Nancy Kress's useful manual *Beginnings, Middles, & Ends* (2011).

Some writers are comfortable creating a detailed outline for a novel. New writers in particular find it helpful to have a road map. Others feel that writing an outline diminishes the pleasure of discovering the story along the way. They argue that working from an outline means you're not creating anymore, you're translating your ideas. Whether you like the organized or the intuitive approach or some blend of both, you'll find a wealth of advice in K. M. Weiland's *Outlining Your Novel: Map Your Way to Success* (2011) and its invaluable companion *Outlining Your Novel Workbook: Step-by-Step Exercises for Planning Your Best Book* (2014). Weiland has also created [digital software](#) for the workbook which includes the workbook contents as well as tools for building settings and characters.

While it's necessary to have a basic grasp of your characters and your world when you begin writing, it's not essential to know everything up front. In fact, even with the most meticulous outlines, you may still find that your characters do things to upset your plans. When this happens, follow your instincts. Don't be afraid to toss your outline or significantly revise it

mid-way through your novel. A good rule to remember is that outlines involve *plotting* what will happen to your characters, but in the end, your *characters* should determine your plot. Read James Scott Bell's *Plot & Structure: Techniques and Exercises for Crafting a Plot That Grips Readers from Start to Finish* (2004), which provides practical advice on crafting and revising plots, creating subplots, and handling common problems that arise.

If you think you'll be content to wander into the woods without a map, read [how famous author Lee Child does it](#). Child begins his novels without anything but a main character. Or check out Steven James' *Story Trumps Structure* (2014). James argues that outlining can kill your story, and his book provides an unorthodox approach to writing your novel. Dean Wesley Smith's *Writing Into the Dark: How to Write a Novel Without an Outline* (2015) hits a middle ground. Smith advocates what programmers call an Agile approach that uses incremental, iterative sequences of work to build a large platform. Both James' and Smith's methodologies will assist those who feel that outlining steals the fun from the discovery process of novel writing.

### WRITING EXERCISES

Dan uses locations to guide his throughline. Location gives him the raw material for shaping his scenes and determining how his characters move from the beginning to the end. On the page you've created in your notebook for "World," (see the assignment in Chapter 4: Choosing Locations) choose (or create now) 10 places or elements of your world. If you don't have them, choose any from the list below. Organize them according to how you think a story should unfold at those locations.

- An airplane flying over a vast wilderness, ocean, or desert
- The back room of movie theater
- A hidden corridor beneath a famous monument
- A busy street in a mega-city
- The inside of a kidnapper's car
- A bridge over a dirty river in a gritty metropolis
- A famous museum
- A well-maintained graveyard
- An isolated hiking trail
- A smuggler's boat
- A makeshift prison in a war zone
- A baby's nursery
- A church or a monastery
- A secluded garden
- An empty warehouse

### For Your Novel

If you haven't established your sole dramatic question, continue brainstorming it now. Because the sole dramatic question contains the most important contract between you and the reader, it will help you stay focused while structuring your novel. Think of this question as a force that will shape the main plotline of your story. Screenwriters call this the "throughline," and it will be particularly useful in writing the middle section of your book.

Begin creating an outline of the work you've done so far. On a page in your notebook titled "Outline," write down the main events of your novel in order. You can do this in a traditional outline format, or if you have the space, you can write your sentences on index cards and post them on a wall to make it easier to view and manipulate the parts. Each event should be a single, short sentence (e.g. Danny gets shot in the leg). Write an ending for your novel



in the outline. Keep your sentences brief and make sure that your climax addresses your sole dramatic question. The purpose of this outline is to help you get an overview of your story and identify which points need strengthening. Keep the outline handy. Future assignments will refer back to it with specific advice on how to strengthen its various parts.

If you have already outlined your novel, go through it and answer the following questions: What is the main contract of the story? You must resolve the promises you made to your reader by the end of the novel.

- What sort of time pressure is working on your characters?
- What is at stake for the protagonist of the novel? Does the pressure on the main characters grow more intense as the story progresses?
- Use these questions to identify places where you feel you need to work on any of the three C's.

# WORKSHEET

Use the following worksheet to build your novel's structure using Dan's advice:

## What is the world of your novel?

---

Go to your "World" page from Chapter 4: Choosing Locations and condense its main points here.

## What is your moral gray area?

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Go back to the assignment titled "Moral Gray Area" from Chapter 3: Finding the Idea and in one paragraph or less explain your moral gray area here.

## Who is your hero (or heroes)?

---

Write a few sentences summarizing what you know about the hero so far. (Refer to your assignment work from Chapter 5: Creating Heroes and Villains for help with this.)

## Who is your villain?

---

Write a few sentences summarizing what you know about him or her. (See your assignment work from Chapter 5: Creating Heroes and Villains for help with this.)

**THE CONTRACT:** What is your sole dramatic question? (What is the main contract between you and the reader—the question you will answer by the end of the novel? If you have multiple storylines, state a question for each one.

**THE CLOCK:** What is the time pressure on your hero? If there is no time pressure, list the forces that drive them.

**THE CRUCIBLE:** What situation prevents your hero from running away from the conflict?

**SETTING THE STAGE:** Write one sentence to describe the most essential thing you should introduce to the reader in Chapter 1 in each of the following categories:

*The Hero*

*The Villain*

*The Conflict*

*The World*

**PROLOGUE:** If the above chapter lacks high stakes and you prefer to start with a bang, write a brief description of your story's climax that you might craft into a prologue. Alternately, describe the earlier dramatic event that sets your story in motion.

**What is the ending of your novel?**

Write a paragraph here.

**SHAPING THE MIDDLE:**

Write as many short sentences as you need to describe the pathway your characters will take to reach the climax.

**Who are your secondary characters?**

(Refer back to your assignments in Chapter 6: Universal Character Tools). Write their names and descriptions in the following columns:

*Characters you’ve already created*

*Characters you need to create*

**Do you have a subplot?**

More than one? (Remember they can involve a sidekick, a villain, or a completely unrelated character.) Describe the subplots here using one paragraph for each.

**CONTROLLING TENSION:** On a separate page, create a numbered list and write down the stakes for your protagonist from beginning to end, showing how they develop over the course of the story. Do they increase in intensity? If not, shape them so that they do.

**Bring all of this information back to your outline.**

Pay particular attention to the middle of the novel, weaving together both the main throughline and subplot(s) with an eye toward escalating the stakes for your protagonist.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## CREATING SUSPENSE, PART 1

I

DAN BROWN

“Suspense is all about making promises to your reader. You’re telling your reader, ‘I know something you don’t know. But I promise I’ll tell you, if you keep going.’”



# CREATING SUSPENSE, PART 1

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Use All the Tools in Your Toolkit*

*Building Suspense With Parallel Plot Lines: Origin*

*Make Big Promises, and Make Them Early*

*Making Promises Early: Dan's Young Adult Prologue*

*Compress the Timeline*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

Writing suspense into any novel is a matter of controlling information—how much you reveal, and when and how you reveal it. In its most practical sense, suspense is a series of incremental steps. While every novel will have a central, overarching storyline that seeks to answer the sole dramatic question, that question is an engine built of thousands of smaller components which carry the reader through each chapter, sustaining their interest along the way.

It's a good idea to make big promises to your reader as early as possible. In particular, you should introduce your novel's sole dramatic question up front. The rest of the novel will be a slow parsing out of information that leads to the final answer. Understanding the pace at which you reveal information is a skill that will take time to master. You must always be gauging an imaginary reader's reaction to your pacing. Will they be bored because you've gone off on a tangent? Will they be frustrated that you're not revealing enough? Have you let them down by giving too much away too quickly, leaving the story feeling flaccid?

The writer's "toolbox" of suspense is actually an entire tool shed of equipment.

The following list is a selection of Dan's favorite tools and others he uses in his novels that you might find useful.

- Introduce parallel plot lines. When you've got subplots for villains and secondary characters, you create more places for suspense and raise questions in the reader's mind about how the various stories might be related.
- Use internal monologue to heighten tension. Anything your protagonist worries about will worry the reader. Their thoughts and feelings can create apprehension and set a mood of anticipation.
- Create a promise in every chapter. Almost anything can be a question to the reader—What's in the box? How will this character get out of the crashing plane? Who planted the bomb beneath the bus? Any question you've raised contains a promise that you'll answer it.
- Create a puzzle. Sometimes a quest revolves around solving a riddle and following a series of clues. This could be a trail of symbolic information or a straightforward solving of a murder mystery.
- Increase physical danger.
- Give characters complicated histories, and withhold information to keep the reader guessing about the dark secrets in someone's past (and how it may affect that character's behavior today).



- Create a character who never appears on stage. These shadowy power brokers are usually villains, but they can surprise you by being heroes, too. Let the reader learn about them through other character's fear of them.
- Place your characters in perilous locations. Sometimes you look at a steep, narrow staircase and just know that someone is going to die there.
- Delay your hero reaching his smaller goals. Let that surprise phone call happen just before your protagonist is supposed to give an important presentation.
- Use dramatic irony to set the stage. Show your villain arriving at the building where the hero is having a lively conversation with an old friend.

Believe it or not, action is not a primary tool of suspense. Suspense comes from the promises you make. Action is typically the *payoff* for the anticipation you've created by making those promises.

One of the most critical tools to generate suspense is to compress a story's timeline so that the characters are under more pressure. If your story takes place over the course of two weeks, try making it happen in one. Dan keeps his novels under 24 hours. Compressing time may feel like an artificial imposition, but the effect on your characters can be immense, and the resulting tension can often jump-start a struggling story.

#### LEARN MORE

In the broadest sense, there are two types of suspense: **telling** the reader what's happening and **withholding** information. In the first case, you generate interest by allowing the reader to *know more* than the hero. This is called

"dramatic irony." For example, your hero is waiting for his spouse to arrive, but she was murdered in a previous chapter. The reader is now filled with dread and expectation for what they know is coming: the hero's shock at the news of his wife's death. Generally speaking, thrillers let the reader know more than the hero. In the second case, the reader *knows the same or less* as the hero. Interest comes from needing more information, and the reader is engaged by the hero's quest because it slowly reveals explanations for things, such as why a hero's wife was murdered. Curiosity drives the reader through the novel. Most mystery novels function this way, but bear in mind that on a page-by-page basis you may be using both types of suspense in any novel.

For a comprehensive look at further suspense techniques, read Ian Irvine's article [\*41 Ways to Create and Heighten Suspense\*](#). Irvine is thorough in his analysis of the tools all writers can use to keep a reader's interest.

Short fiction provides numerous examples of suspense techniques. As with thrillers, the big promise is often made up front and delivered on quickly. Read the following classic and modern short stories and identify the tools from the list above that heighten the tension.

[\*"The Lady, or the Tiger?"\*](#) (1882) by Frank Stockton

[\*"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"\*](#) (1890) by Ambrose Bierce

[\*"The Lottery"\*](#) (1948) by Shirley Jackson

[\*"Home"\*](#) (1953) by Gwendolyn Brooks

[\*"All at One Point"\*](#) (1965) by Italo Calvino

[\*"And of Clay We Are Created"\*](#) (1991) by Isabelle Allende

[\*"A Conversation from the Third Floor"\*](#) (1994) by Mohamed El-Bisatie

[“Grace Period”](#) (2011) by Will Baker  
[“Redeployment”](#) (2011) by Phil Klay  
[“Black Box”](#) (2012) by Jennifer Egan

Prologues are another great tool for engaging your reader with dramatic action. Typically, they flash forward into the future (and show part of the story’s climax) or they refer to a significant past event that has set the story in motion (the catalyst). Prologues function as a promise to the reader that eventually you will reach that climax or explain that catalytic act, but mostly they offer a strong dose of intrigue or heart-pounding action to assure the reader that this novel will keep their interest. They are especially useful in books where the opening chapters take their time introducing the hero, villain, and the world. Even literary novels embrace this technique. For a well-crafted example, read the beginning of Donna Tartt’s novel *The Goldfinch* (2013). Then check out this [Writer’s Digest article](#) for some warnings about what *not* to do in a prologue.

#### WRITING EXERCISES

Choose a mundane moment from any of the writing you’ve done so far. For example, pick a scene where your characters are walking or eating or having a quiet discussion. If you don’t have a scene like this yet, select a topic from the list below. On a page in your notebook, write a paragraph (no more than a page) turning your mundane scene into a suspenseful moment using the three C’s or any of the suspense tools from the Chapter Review above. You only have one paragraph and one page, so if there’s something your reader needs to know in order for things to make sense, find clever ways to blend that information into the narrative.

- A spider crawling up his web
- A child coming out of school
- Two people sitting in a car at a stop light
- A teenager lying in bed at night
- A group of men going into a stadium
- A woman eating alone in a restaurant

The best way to master the tools of suspense is to read your favorite book and analyze how suspense has worked for you, paying particular attention to the techniques you enjoyed most. Think of a novel or a movie that you liked for its suspense and write down a quick list of the moments that had the strongest impact on you. Then go back to the novel or movie and look more carefully at those memorable scenes. What was the writer doing to create such interest and tension? Can you do something similar in your own story?

#### For Your Novel

Go back to the “Outline” from the assignment in Chapter 10: Building a Story from the Ground Up, or use the outline from your novel-in-progress. Find the places where your hero discovers vital information or takes a significant step on his quest. (You do not need to have a full outline to do this, just work with what you have.) Write each moment on a separate index card or slip of paper and arrange the cards in order. Look over your main plot points and answer the following questions: Does this progression of events feel clichéd or predictable? Where does it slow or falter? What can I do to make it more surprising? Identify which, if any, of the tools of suspense from the Chapter Review above you’re using in your story. Try adding in any that you’re not using. Experiment with rearranging the cards or adding in new ones to determine what will have the most impact on the reader.

A collage of torn paper strips with text fragments, including 'Grand earth to whom h', 'the wal', 'world's n', 'own on', 'summo', 'A telepho', 'was ringing in the', 'He fumbled f', 'ned it on. Squinti', 'he saw a plush F', 'VI furniture, han', 'ahogany four-pos', 'd.', 'Out the right-hand window, south acr', 'Langdon could see the dramatically li', 'the esteemed Musee d'Orsay. Glancin', 'ultramodern Pompidou Center, which'.

A collage of torn paper strips with text fragments, including "Grand earth to whom h", "the wal", "world's n", "own on", "summo", "A telepho", "was ringing in the", "He fumbled f", "ned it on. Squinti", "he saw a plush F", "VI furniture, han", "ahogany four-pos", "d.", "Out the right-hand window, south acr", "Langdon could see the dramatically li", "the esteemed Musee d'Orsay. Glancin", "ultramodern Pompidou Center, which".

A collage of torn paper strips with text fragments, including "Grand gallery, and", "whom he", "the wall", "world's m", "own on", "summo", "rituals", "A telepho", "unfamiliar", "lamp and", "surround", "with Lou", "a colossa", "was ringing in the", "ng. He fumbled f", "ned it on. Squinti", "he saw a plush F", "VI furniture, han", "ahogany four-pos", "d.", "the end", "cent", "now", "op of the", "h. Th", "er", "at a", "in", "alf", "akir", "Out the right-hand window, south acr", "Langdon could see the dramatically li", "the esteemed Musee d'Orsay. Glancin", "ultramodern Pompidou Center, which".

# CREATING SUSPENSE, PART 2

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Start Scenes With a Sense of Urgency*

*Experiment With Different Kinds of Cliffhangers*

*Cliffhanger Case Study: The Da Vinci Code*

*Find Believable Reasons to Withhold Information*

*Use Flashbacks to Make Big Promises*

*Instill Sudden Suspense With “Pulses”*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

In a thriller, it's important to keep tension high. You can do this descriptively by showing your characters in tense situations, and you can do it structurally by rearranging the parts of a chapter to keep the pacing swift. Both techniques involve withholding information from the reader. By doing this, you don't get bogged down in details or “information dumps” that slow down the pacing. Crucially, withholding allows room in the reader's mind for the growth of questions and ideas. This work on the reader's part is a vital element of writing and is especially important in sustaining interest.

Useful plotting strategies involve crafting situations where your characters are unable to get the information or tools that they desperately need. This forces the characters to strategize and take actions to reach their goals. If you do this, it's important to construct believable scenarios. Make sure your characters don't have an easy way of getting the information they need. Otherwise, your readers will lose respect for you and your characters.

Structural strategies include cutting out superfluous descriptive passages or blending descriptive writing into action scenes. Do you

need to describe a building? Don't just look at it from the front and give the reader a dry paragraph of its architectural style; instead, let the reader see it through the protagonist's eyes as he moves into the building and reacts to the things that are happening around him. Try opening a chapter in the middle of a scene. This will raise questions in the reader's mind (which you must quickly answer). Equally, you can open with a narrative question or a bit of unattributed dialogue. Keeping the reader slightly disoriented is a way of making promises on a micro-level—you're saying you're going to clarify things soon—and, when done correctly, will sustain their curiosity. “Pulses” are another useful strategy. These short sentences or phrases remind the reader of the dangers in a scene. Perhaps your characters are talking calmly. A pulse can remind the reader that the villain is just outside their door.

Cliffhangers pose big questions at the end of a chapter or section. Typically, a cliffhanger stops during a climactic event midway through the action instead of at its natural conclusion. Often, chapter endings fulfill a previous promise. Instead, take the reader to the moment before fulfillment and stop the chapter there. Is your hero about to push the villain off of a racing yacht? Stop where the hero has the villain



in his grip. The reader will want to know how it plays out. You can also provide a surprise at a chapter's end. This can be a new piece of information or an entire plot twist. Maybe the villain reaches for a hidden knife. Or as your hero is pushing the villain's head into the sea, he notices a tattoo on his shoulder that means something remarkable—you don't have to say what. Leave the reader thinking, "All right, I'll read just one more page...."

### LEARN MORE

In general, there are two ways to augment tension in your story. **Descriptive elements** that create tension are individual; they come from your story and from the forces or events that are pressuring your characters. (For example, a villain is trying to kill your hero.) **Structural elements** that create tension involve the way you write your story. Dan's tips include the following techniques:

- Start chapters with a sense of urgency
- Keep passages concise and cut out superfluous descriptions
- Blend descriptive passages into action scenes
- Stay grounded in a protagonist's sensory experience
- Find plausible ways to withhold key information from a reader (i.e. narrate from the point of view of a character who can't get/doesn't know the information)
- Open a chapter in the middle of a scene
- Open a chapter or section with a question, an interesting fact, or a change of pace
- Use a "pulse" to remind the reader of lurking danger
- Use flashbacks to open new sources of suspense
- Finish a chapter with a cliffhanger ending

Dan describes a "pulse" as a short sentence or phrase that reminds the reader of the danger in a scene. For example, in Chapter 16 of *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), Langdon and Sophie are trapped in a restroom, trying to escape the Louvre. The police are blocking their exit. While Langdon and Sophie are strategizing, Dan provides this pulse: "The cell phone in Sophie's sweater pocket suddenly began ringing. *Fache probably*. She reached in her sweater and turned off the phone." This is a reminder that police chief Bezu Fache is eager to arrest Langdon, that he is just outside, and that he's growing impatient. It adds to the tension both for the characters and the reader.

*One Thousand and One Nights* is renowned for its cliffhangers. Scheherazade is the bride of a malicious king who vows to kill every woman he marries after their wedding night. To avoid this, she tells him a gripping story but doesn't finish it, forcing him to keep her alive another day. (You can read a sampling of some of the stories [here](#).) Cliffhangers became a modern phenomenon with the serialization of Charles Dickens's stories, and they've continued to be popular right up to the present day. A cliffhanger takes advantage of the [Zeigarnik Effect](#). This psychological theory states that people can recall a task better if it is interrupted. It seems that humans naturally desire closure, and to deprive them of it triggers their interest. No matter if it's on television or in books, one pattern remains: after a cliffhanger, most writers don't continue the action they've just interrupted. Instead, having won their audience's attention, they switch into a more thoughtful discourse or a slow-moving exposition. Sometimes they move to another storyline entirely, busily working to build more promises. It's important to remember that although you've nabbed the reader's interest, you still have to fulfill your



promises to them or not only will they lose interest, they'll lose faith in you as well.

Although you can create a cliffhanger at the end of any chapter throughout your novel, it's harder to pull off at the end of a book. For a thoughtful analysis of how to do it, read [\*Writing Series: The Cliffhanger Dilemma\*](#) at Pub(lishing) Crawl, or check out the following novels for a sampling of successful cliffhanger endings.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) by John Fowles

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood

*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005) by J.K. Rowling

*No Country For Old Men* (2005) by Cormac McCarthy

*In the Woods* (2007) by Tana French

*The Knife of Never Letting Go* (2008) by Patrick Ness

*Catching Fire* (2009) by Suzanne Collins

*The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers

*The Girl on the Train* (2015) by Paula Hawkins

Opening a story in the middle of a scene (called a "cold open" in film and television) is a favorite literary device as well. In television, a cold open is a short scene that introduces the main storyline of the episode. It usually goes straight to the main plot line to get the viewer hooked and generally ends on a commercial break or with the show's opening credits. In novels, the cold open is just a way of starting a chapter or a scene by dropping the reader into the middle of the action. Remember to open your chapter at a critical moment of conversation or action. Don't just fail to explain what's going on; take the reader to the most interesting moment of the scene and weave in the setting and other details as you go along. For more specific tips,

read Nancy Kress's article in *Writer's Digest* [\*Start Your Fiction Off With a Bang\*](#).

It's helpful to think of suspense in terms of the intended effect on your reader.

- Dan's work provides numerous examples of creating a **puzzle** for the reader. In *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu must solve a cryptex in order to find out why someone may have killed Sophie's grandfather and is trying to kill them. Time pressure and physical danger play a role as well, but the reader's prime focus is understanding the riddle.
- Mood is an effective tool. Stephen King likes to create **worry** in the reader and often raises the threat that something terrible might happen to his characters. He does this through internal monologue and crucible-like situations. Read *The Stand* (1978) for a classic example of these techniques.
- Any kind of time pressure will fill the reader with **urgency**. Deadlines are effective when they provide a threat to something the protagonist cares about.
- **Fear** is a basic emotion that thriller writers love to elicit. Physical danger will grip your reader and is best conveyed through concise sensory detail. Capture exactly what it's like for your hero, and your audience will experience the fear more intensely. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) does this superbly. Writing about any kind of nightmarish character can create an intense apprehension in your reader as well. For some examples, see the "virals" in Justin Cronin's *The Passage* (2010) or any carnivore in Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990).
- Creating expectations can trigger **dread** in your reader. Perhaps your hero is watching something intently or is afraid of a horrible

event. Showing this through internal monologue will give your reader a front row seat to the anxiety.

- Abrupt surprises in the story will give the reader a **shock** and serve a number of goals. Sudden reversals or disasters create instability, and there's nothing worse than discovering that a character you thought was good is actually wicked. George R.R. Martin does this best in *Game of Thrones* (1996).
- Most of all, you want your reader to **wonder** what will happen next. You can generate curiosity about almost anything. In his book, *The Fear Index* (2012), Robert Harris creates page-turning suspense about a man who does almost nothing but sit at a computer.

### WRITING EXERCISES

Perform a close analysis of withholding in a novel, movie, television show, or short story. Choose a memorable scene that was especially riveting to you, where you were anxious to know what would happen next. Freeze that moment and answer the following:

- What do you want to know most right now?
- What basic facts have you needed to learn in order to reach this point? Be concise.
- Did you have an idea of what would happen? Is that what actually happened?
- Were you satisfied by the event that came next? Why, or why not?

### For Your Novel

Write an opening scene. This could be a prologue or a first chapter. Focus on introducing your hero or villain. What is your hero doing at the beginning of the story? How does he or she get involved in the action? What action does your villain take to launch the story? Don't worry about structure yet, just begin writing. Try to finish the scene.

If you have a novel-in-progress, select any chapter opening and try cutting its descriptive paragraphs or phrases. Start instead with a phrase of dialogue, an action, or a question. Try to disorient your reader slightly. Don't be afraid to drop the reader into the middle of a scene. Move any descriptive writing to a later part of the chapter, or blend it into the action.

Choose a scene from your writing that has an ending. This could either be a chapter ending or the conclusion of a scene within a chapter. Experiment with creating a cliffhanger by cutting out the last few paragraphs of the scene. Move them to the next chapter or create a section break. Alternately, create a surprise. Let your characters learn something unexpected. Or don't deliver on the promise you've made that the reader is expecting; instead, create a new promise.

## I

“The most important writing lesson that you can learn from music is the importance of giving the reader exactly what they want—maybe in a way they don’t see coming.”



# WRITING CHAPTERS AND SCENES

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Start With the Purpose of Your Chapter*  
*Scene Deconstruction: The Da Vinci Code*  
*Think Musically About Your Chapters*  
*Create a Negative Space*  
*Find a Fresh Way to Begin Each Chapter*  
*Paint Your Characters Into a Corner*  
*Choose Obstacles That Are Interesting to You*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

Dan approaches each chapter he writes with a specific goal, which he summarizes in a single bullet point. One chapter might be focused on a chase scene. The goal of another might be introducing the hero. Once he's established that essential point, he follows his creative impulse and asks: How can I make this interesting?

In thrillers, you want to pull your reader in quickly. It's best to open a chapter with a teaser—an action, a bit of dialogue, or an interesting fact that will grab their attention. Even if you're returning to a scene from a previous chapter, a teaser will provide an energizing break. Dan's rule of thumb for chapter openings is to make sure that the reader is always learning something new. This could be a new character, an element of the setting, or a piece of information.

It's important to vary the pacing of your story. This means controlling how fast or slow you unfold events for your reader. By balancing action scenes with more reflective, internal moments, you give the reader an equal dose of excitement and recovery. The quieter moments

in any novel—what Dan calls “negative space”—are the places to share relationship details, a character's thoughts and memories, and anything a character might do while taking a break. These spaces, which are just as important as the more dramatic scenes, give readers a chance to orient themselves and process their reactions. Too much of the same pace—no matter how exciting it is—will begin to feel boring.

If the story itself falters, remember that the stakes have to grow increasingly higher for your protagonist. Throw obstacles into their path, even if you don't know how they'll surmount them. Sometimes forcing your characters into a corner can stimulate your problem-solving skills. When you choose obstacles that reflect your own passions and style, you'll find your enthusiasm comes through on the page.

## LEARN MORE

**Pacing** generally means how fast or slow the story is moving *for the reader*. This is determined by the length of a scene and the speed at which you distribute information to your



reader. Generally speaking, descriptive passages tend to slow things down, while dialogue and action speed things up. In suspense writing, pacing is usually swift. However, you will need to utilize both slow and fast scenes. (Remember that you build suspense by promising things to the reader, and this happens during both description and dialogue. Action scenes are usually the fulfillment of a promise.) The best way to ensure that your story has a good pace is to balance dialogue and description. It's also important to know where you're headed. This is where the exercises from Chapter 10: Building a Story From the Ground Up—knowing your ending and your sole dramatic question—will begin to work for you.

Dan draws inspiration for his structure and plotting from his knowledge of music. He sees a musical score as having the same type of contract that exists in a novel. In writing, you use tension to gain a reader's interest and then resolution or release to fulfill the contract. Music creates the same kind of tension, only the anticipation comes from repetition, a gradual increase in pitch, or a change in loudness. For more on tension and release in musical theory, you can check out Musical-U's [primer](#).

- *Pianissimo*—‘very soft.’ In sheet music, this term is an instruction to the musician to play a sequence of notes very softly.
- *Fortissimo*—‘very loud.’ In sheet music, this term is an instruction to the musician to play a sequence of notes very loudly.
- *Tonic*—the first note of a musical scale. This note is often the “resolution” tone that comes at the end of a dramatic climax.
- Dan compares the *pianissimo* and *fortissimo* in music to the “quieter” and “louder” moments

in your novel. Without the quiet moments, your loud ones won't feel very strong—and vice versa. You need to use both in order to give your reader a full experience. Dan also compares the musical tonic to the climax of a novel. It's a return to your book's opening notes—i.e. your biggest promise to the reader. Without returning to this note and fulfilling your original promise, your reader will never be satisfied.

In all writing, there are two types of narration: **scene** and **dramatic narration**. In scene, you show the characters performing an action or having a conversation. This tends to speed up the pacing. In dramatic narration, you simply tell the reader what the characters did, but the event remains “offstage.” This type of narration can slow the story down. To keep pacing from feeling monotonous, it's a good idea to vary the two modes of writing. Show the reader a scene when it's interesting or necessary, but use summary to move over the less exciting parts. In her book *Write Away: One Novelist's Approach to Fiction and the Writing Life* (2004), author Elizabeth George gives an excellent analysis of scene and dramatic narration (with examples) in her chapter “The Scene: Okay, So It Is Rocket Science.”

#### WRITING EXERCISES

Write a descriptive passage about anything that interests you right now (or choose a passage from your novel-in-progress). Once you're done, go over the writing and cut out any superfluous adjectives and adverbs, try to eliminate passive voice, and look carefully at your word choices, getting rid of generic words and choosing concise ones.



### For Your Novel

---

Go back to the introductory scene or chapter you worked on in the assignment section of Chapter 12: Creating Suspense, Part 2. Begin working on a next scene or chapter. Right away, put your character into an impossible spot and see what they do to get out of it.

Choose a section from your novel-in-progress where your characters encounter something interesting. Perhaps they find something they've been searching for, or maybe they're about to be surprised by the appearance of a new character. Instead of telling the reader all at once what they find, use description to lengthen the moment and create tension. Begin by writing an incomplete description—just enough to tease the reader's interest. Create an obstacle for your characters, something that distracts them. Then give another hint at what they see (or think they see) but again, don't explain it entirely. Find ways to drag out the description until your characters finally see it. In her book *Word Painting: A Guide to Writing More Descriptively* (1999), Rebecca McClanahan calls this the "striptease" method of descriptive writing. It can be extremely effective in keeping a reader's interest on a micro-level.

Select three scenes at random from your story and answer the following questions about each one: Does it move the story forward? Is it creating or helping you fulfill a contract with the reader? If the scene doesn't do both of these things, consider cutting it out or altering it so that it does. Continue to do this exercise with different scenes every day.

Choose a chapter from your novel. With a highlighter, mark the passages that are scenes, leaving the passages that are dramatic narration unmarked. Is there an imbalance between the two types of narration? If so, add some dramatic narration into scenes, or vice versa. Remember that scenes tend to speed the pacing, and dramatic narration tends to slow it down.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN SELECTING AND UTILIZING NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW

I

DAN BROWN

“Point of view is a powerful tool. It can help you color a chapter, reveal characters and exposition, and best of all, withhold information. So be excited about point of view.”



# SELECTING AND UTILIZING NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW

## SUBCHAPTERS

### *Control the POV*

#### *Choose the Character Who Has the Most to Lose or Learn*

#### *Experiment with Different POVs*

#### *Use POV to Withhold Information*

#### *Describe Things That Only Your POV Character Can Know*

#### *Use POV to Reveal Character*

#### *Be Cognizant of the Information Your Characters Can Access*

#### *POV Case Study: Origin*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

Point of view is the “eye” through which you’re telling a story. Most novels are written in one of two styles: First person, which involves a narrator who tells their story. (“I ran toward the gate.”) Or third person, which is the author telling a story about a character. (“He woke up that morning.”)

While first person narration can provide intimacy, it is also limited by the perceptive abilities of the character. They are confined to report only what they would realistically know about the story, and they are further confined by their own perspective. This can be useful when creating an unreliable narrator or when creating red herrings (see Chapter 7: Character Case Study: *The Da Vinci Code*).

Third person narration is a more flexible choice. It allows you to switch between characters’ points of view. You can even zoom in and out from complete omniscience (a narrative voice that has access to all information in the novel) to what’s called a limited or “close” third point of view (a narrative that adheres to a single character). This latter style gives you

the ability to be inside a character’s thoughts, feelings, and sensations, which can give readers a deeper experience of character and scene.

When choosing which character will serve as your main point of view for any chapter or scene, Dan recommends honing in on the person who has the most to lose or learn. Whichever character is facing the highest stakes—the one who has the most to lose in a particular scene—will be the one to follow closely, because their thoughts and reactions will carry the most tension for the reader. The character who has the most to learn is often an equally good choice. Readers tend to identify with characters who are learning like they are, and through these characters you can provide valuable information to the reader.

At times, you may choose the point of view of a secondary or unimportant character—a security guard, for example, instead of your hero. This secondary character’s curiosity or confusion can guide the reader to ask the questions you want them to ask. Perhaps your main character knows something you don’t want the reader to learn yet. The secondary character doesn’t know the information, so narrating

from their point of view allows you to withhold the information from the reader in a plausible way.

Whichever narration style you use, it's important to establish your point of view quickly. Always let the reader know which character's perspective you're following in any given scene. If you're using third person, you should use the character's name early in the section. Even a simple statement like "Robert felt tired" is enough to convey this information.

Point of view is an essential tool in character development. You're describing the world through their eyes and letting the reader know what they think and feel. You'll need to be aware at all times what your characters' limitations are. Review your writing frequently to scan for mistakes you might have made in giving a character information or opinions they wouldn't normally have.

#### LEARN MORE

While there are numerous ways to employ **point of view** in fiction, it's good to familiarize yourself with the basics.

- **First person point of view:** One of the characters is narrating the story. This is generally revealed by the "I" sentence construction. ("I went to work.") The reader assumes that this character is closely related to the story's action—either a main character or someone close to the protagonist.
- **Third person point of view:** The author is narrating a story about the characters and refers to them in "he" and "she" constructions. ("He said he was hungry.") This point of view is subdivided:

- **Omniscient**—the omniscient narrator knows everything about the story and its characters. This narrator can enter anyone's mind, move freely through time, and give the reader their own opinions and observations as well as those of the characters.
- **Limited Omniscient**—this point of view (often called a "close third") is when an author sticks closely to one character but remains in third person. The narrator can switch between different characters, but will stay doggedly with one until the end of a chapter or section.

Dan prefers a close third narration. It not only allows the reader to have a more concrete experience of a scene, it can be used to heighten suspense. By limiting a reader's perspective, you can withhold information from them, which is critical in building interest. A close third narrative also allows Dan to add depth to his villains. By revealing their innermost thoughts, he humanizes them and often explores his moral gray area at the same time. For a wealth of advice on using close third, read Kaitlin Branch's [\*The Ultimate Guide to Third Person Limited Point of View\*](#) at Re:Fiction.

One of the classic tools for building suspense is to create a narrator who is unreliable. When you limit the information on the page to a single character's point of view, and that character happens to be hiding something from you (or simply doesn't know an important piece of information), you can withhold startling information from the reader and generate enthralling plot twists. Read *Gone Girl* (2012) by Gillian Flynn or *Rebecca* (1938) by Daphne du Maurier for brilliant examples of unreliable narrators. Also check out this [BookBub list](#) of modern novels that follow this trend.

Point of view can also be used for the opposite: to give a reader *more* information than the characters have. (Remember that there are two basic categories of suspense: telling and withholding. See Chapter 11: Creating Suspense, Part 1 for a complete explanation). Switching points of view allows you to give your reader a fuller picture. For example, your main character doesn't know that a killer is just outside the door, but by switching into another character's POV, you can let the reader know something that the hero doesn't. This tension will keep a reader on the edge of their seat.

Many of the best writers who focus on sustaining a reader's attention use point of view to convey multiple elements efficiently. For example, in "To Build a Fire," Jack London introduces the deadly Alaska Yukon through the eyes of his protagonist. In the space of a paragraph, we learn about the character, see the gloomy world he inhabits, and begin to understand the dangers he will face. Read the following short stories to get a sense of how much or little can be conveyed in a tightened frame.

Jack London, "[To Build a Fire](#)" (1902)

Alice Munro, "[The Train](#)" (2012)

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "[The Autumn of the Patriarch](#)" (1975)

Anton Chekhov, "[The Looking Glass](#)" (1885)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "[A Private Experience](#)" (2008)

Ernest Hemingway, "[The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber](#)" (1936)

It's important to note that when you establish point of view, you are creating another type of contract with the reader: that you will adhere to that point of view for the course of the scene. It's all right to have different subplots told from different points of view throughout your novel—Dan does this frequently in his books—but you should treat each point of view as an individual section or chapter. While you're in a point of view, stick to it. For example, if you're narrating from your hero's perspective and, in the middle of a scene, you suddenly switch to the point of view of a different character, the disruption will jar your reader out of the story.

## WRITING EXERCISES

### For Your Novel

Go back to a scene you generated from the assignment in Chapter 13: Writing Chapters and Scenes, or select an excerpt from your novel that involves your hero or villain. Re-write the event in the following ways:

- Narrate from the point of view of a character who is withholding a secret from the reader.
- Narrate from a first-person point of view, showing the narrator's true thoughts and feelings about the story.
- Narrate the event from an omniscient point of view, bringing in as many different perspectives as you deem necessary.

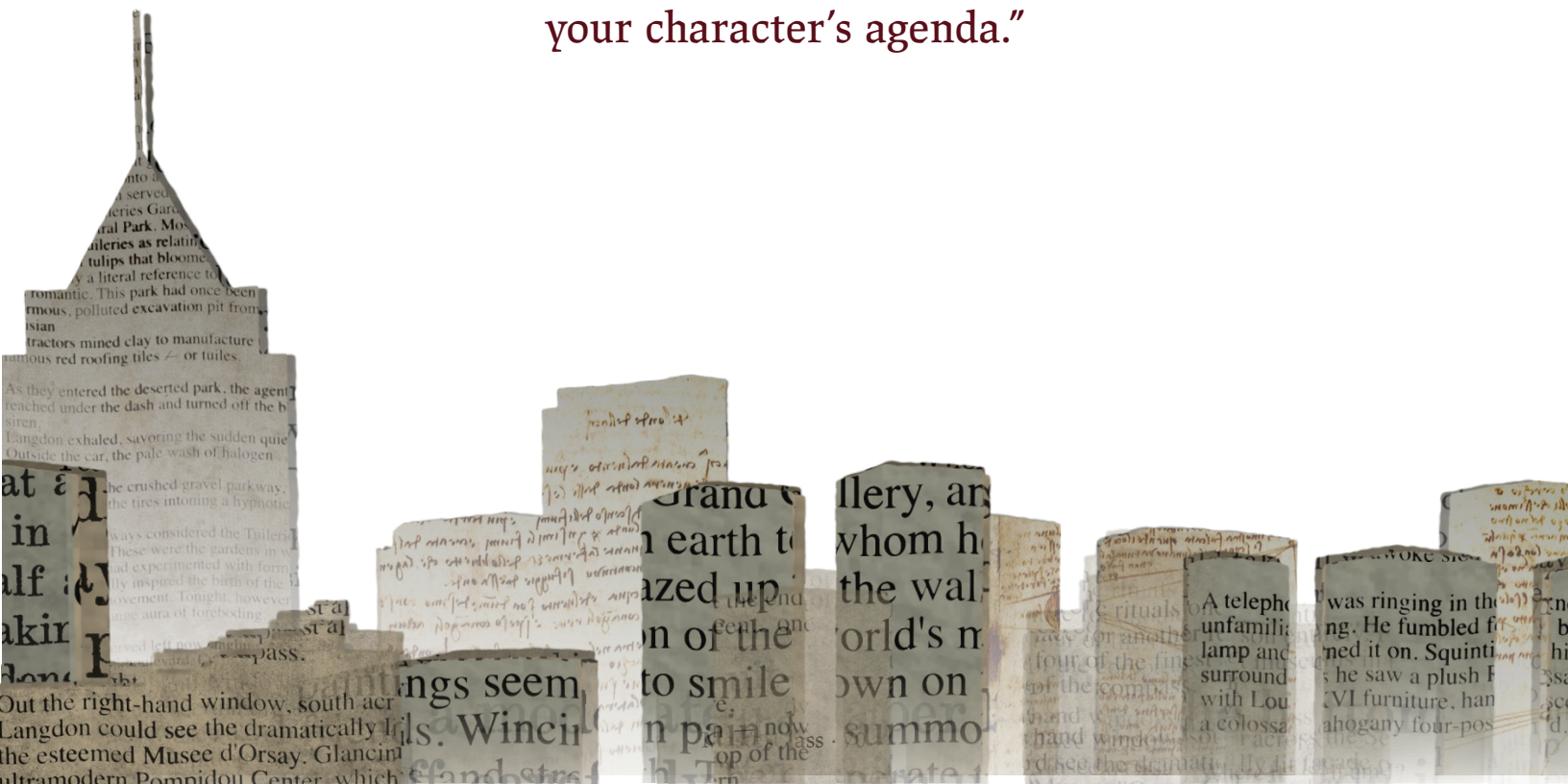


## CHAPTER FIFTEEN EXPOSITION AND DIALOGUE

I

DAN BROWN

“Don’t forget: human beings talk because they want something. They want to tell you something, they want to get some information, they want to express something. Dialogue is always driven by your character’s agenda.”



# EXPOSITION AND DIALOGUE

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Appeal to Your Reader's Senses*

*Keep Prose Transparent*

*Delineate Flashbacks Clearly*

*Use Past Perfect Tense to Ease Into Flashbacks*

*Use Present Tense for Fact*

*Find Interesting Ways to Share Information*

*Exposition Case Study: Origin*

*Think of Dialogue Like Music*

*Create Dialogue of Conflict or Revelation*

*Put Your Characters in Motion*

*Intersperse Dialogue and Exposition Effectively*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

In fiction, it's important to keep a balance between two types of narration: dialogue and exposition. Dialogue refers to the things that characters say, while exposition refers to sequences of descriptive narration.

Dialogue should always be appropriate to the character and should take their point of view, beliefs, background, and education into consideration. People's desires motivate them to speak, so when writing dialogue, ask yourself what your characters want. Ideally, you will know your characters well enough to sense not only what they want but how they would express their desires verbally. Will they be blunt or subtly manipulative? Will they be angry, or do they always keep their cool? Allow dialogue to encourage disagreement between your characters. It's more interesting when characters are experiencing tension or sharing different points of view. Like the polyphonic structure of an orchestra, each person will bring their own "sound" to a conversation, but the different notes should all work together.

Dan prefers handling exposition through a character's sensory experience. This helps ground the reader and can transmit visceral feelings for the character and the setting. Use your research and your imagination to describe what places sound and smell and feel like. If you're working with a longer section of dry information, find creative ways to present it through a character's point of view. Perhaps they're having an argument about it, or they're watching someone else present the information. Give the character's opinions, and try to tie the information to a concrete, sensory reality for your characters. Ideally, you'll make information as palatable as possible by keeping it relevant to the setting, characters, and plot.

People tend to look at their surroundings with a traveling gaze. Dan recommends following this pattern in your writing. For example, if your hero walks into a bank, don't describe the teller, then jump to the security guard, and then to the potted plants. Instead, let your hero's gaze move over objects in a more natural way. Maybe he'll notice the bright red carpet leading up to the glass-enclosed teller booth.

A reflection in the glass may make him notice the security guard behind him, who is standing next to an enormous potted plant. This technique can have a subtle but compelling effect.

Unless you're writing a film script or a stage play, it's best to maintain a balance between dialogue and exposition. Try breaking up long passages of exposition with short dialogue—even a sentence or two can be refreshing. If you have a very long section of dialogue, it's good to insert brief sections of exposition to keep your reader grounded in time and place. One of Dan's techniques is to keep characters physically moving during dialogue. For example, if your characters are on the run and having a conversation in an airport, you can show the numerous distractions they might notice as they walk nervously through the airport. By interspersing brief distractions (clumsy passengers, stern security guards) between segments of dialogue, you prevent the pacing from becoming monotonous. The distractions can also augment the mood (danger and suspicion) and can pull your characters back into action.

Ideally, your language will flow so smoothly that the reader doesn't take notice of it. They want to be immersed in the thoughts and actions of your characters. They want to feel that they're in the world you've created. Clunky language, bad dialogue, and poorly-conceived scenes will all draw your reader out of the story. When that happens, their interest will begin to fade.

#### LEARN MORE

Whenever your narrative or characters recall a memory from a time before the story began, you have two choices. If the memory is short, you can describe it briefly. If it's longer, you

may want to pull the reader back into a past scene. This is called a **flashback**. It's important to mark the beginning and ending of a flashback to make your time jumps clear to the reader. Once inside the flashback, Dan likes to use a few lines of **past perfect tense** to introduce the change—e.g. “he *had gone* to the marina.” Past perfect tense uses the verb “to have” with the past participle of another verb (in this case “gone”). After a few lines of this, Dan transitions into **simple past tense**—e.g. “he climbed onto the boat.” Generally speaking, using past perfect for a long section of text is jarring for most readers. It's enough to use it only at the start of the flashback before switching to simple past tense. At the flashback's end, Dan uses a reminder that the reader is back in the current scene. (“The hero returned to the present...”) For more tips on using flashbacks, read [3 Tips for Writing Successful Flashbacks](#) at *Writer's Digest*. And if you feel like nerding out, check out Alison Nastasi's slideshow [8 Films That Make Fascinating Use of Flashbacks](#) for some visual inspiration to jump-start your own ideas.

Flashbacks can also be a powerful way to make a promise to a reader. It's common to open a chapter with a cataclysmic event, then move abruptly into the past (“Three Weeks Earlier”) where (usually with a dose of dramatic irony) your protagonist finds himself in an entirely normal situation. This forges a contract with the reader that you'll explain how the hero went from one situation to its opposite. You can also use flashbacks to fill in a backstory about characters or situations, and the flashback sequence can create new micro-promises itself.

George Orwell said, “[Good prose is like a window pane.](#)” Orwell is well-known for his attitude toward plain language: “Never use a

long word where a short one will do.” “If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.” A lot of his best advice comes from a short essay *Politics and the English Language* (1946) in which he argues that bad thinking is the true cause of bad writing. Although published over 60 years ago, his ideas remain fresh. If you want to clean up your style, avoid clichés and use precision. Thriller writers tend to use a straightforward style. It’s efficient and allows the reader to sink into a story without tripping over difficult language. Orwell might argue that this is a result of clear thinking. You know where your story is going, and your primary interest is in bringing the reader there. Yet just because you have a clear style doesn’t mean you have to give up on mood, tone, and depth of characterization. Each writer has their own way of using language, called a **writer’s voice**. Check out the following master stylists to sample the variety of voices that suspense writing offers.

- *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974) by John Le Carré. *The New York Times* describes his “bald, adjective-free prose” as making you feel like you’re “forever just one step behind a tripping kind of jazz beat.” Read more about Le Carré’s style [here](#).
- *Out of Sight* (1996) by Elmore Leonard. Master of “invisible” language, Leonard writes the way people speak: in short, broken sentences with conversational ticks. You can read how he does this in *Write It Like Elmore Leonard: Ditch Formal Language* at the Writing Cooperative.
- *In the Woods* (2007) by Tana French. Her language is dream-like and absorbingly lyrical, but also manages to create such a strong mood of suspense that you can’t put her books down.
- *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) by James M. Cain. This novel did more than

any other to launch the noir genre, which is known for a terse prose style that is concise but shockingly effective.

- *Istanbul Passage* (2012) by Joseph Kanon. Renowned for his staccato style. Short bursts of prose. Lavish settings. Fast-moving plots.
- *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) by Walter Mosley. Mosley’s style, influenced by Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and science fiction, is a heady mix of sophistication and slang.
- *Along Came a Spider* (1993) by James Patterson. Known for his short chapters and his absolute focus on story, Patterson’s language is colloquial and swift.

Read Rebecca McClanahan’s *Word Painting: A Guide to Writing More Descriptively* (1999) for a well-rounded look at using sensory detail in your work. McClanahan’s book covers everything: description, dialogue, characterization, plot, pacing, and point of view—with tons of advice and exercises for making those elements sensory, vivid, and compelling.

*How to Write Dazzling Dialogue: The Fastest Way to Improve Any Manuscript* (2014) by James Scott Bell is a great resource for new and experienced writers alike. This book is geared toward helping you craft dialogue that is authentic and natural. It will also help you avoid many common mistakes.

There is a quiet battle going on among writers regarding **dialogue attribution**. This refers to the phrases you use when describing who is speaking—i.e. “he said,” and “she said.” Generally, you can write an entire novel using only “said,” without having to resort to more descriptive verbs like “shouted,” “cried,” or “whimpered.” Stephen King, whose famous opinion that “[the road to hell is paved with adverbs](#),” finds them especially annoying in



dialogue attribution. (Tags like “he said cheekily” drive him crazy.) In suspense writing, it’s best to take Dan’s advice and try to keep your language from jarring the reader out of the story. This means sticking to “he said” and “she said,” and keeping adverbs to a minimum. James Scott Bell offers some great advice for thriller writers at the Kill Zone Blog: [A Short Course on Dialogue Attributions](#).

For an example of how Dan uses flashback in his work, read the excerpt from the first chapter of *Origin*, reproduced on the following page. This flashback illustrates Dan’s lessons in action—it reveals an entire scene in past tense, with the past perfect tense taking you in cleanly, and the word “now” transitioning you back to the moment of the novel with clarity.

#### WRITING EXERCISES

Pick one of the topics below and write one page of dialogue between any two or more people on the subject. Make them disagree.

- The mysterious sound outside the window
- The old Chevy that’s been following their car for half a mile now
- Purses for men
- Airplane turbulence
- The barn that looks empty from the outside

Once you’ve finished the dialogue, go back over it and add in descriptive sentences throughout until you feel that it’s balanced.

Choose a passage from a novel whose writing you admire. Copy a paragraph of the writing in your notebook. Beneath that, try to mimic the

author’s tone and rhythm by writing your own paragraph, using the characters and settings and problems of your choice. Try this with different authors. What specifically appeals to you about their prose? What tone does it set? How does it make you feel? Do your characters act differently when you write in this voice?

#### For Your Novel

In one paragraph, describe your protagonist entering a building or arriving at a significant location to meet someone. Pay attention to the way your hero’s gaze takes in the surroundings and work on moving the gaze in a natural way.

Follow Dan’s tip and scan through your writing so far, looking for places where there is a long passage of only dialogue or only exposition (more than three pages). See if you can balance the section by adding in dialogue or exposition. Even a short clip might be useful.

Find a section of dialogue from your novel that you feel isn’t working. On a separate sheet of paper, write the purpose of the dialogue scene. It can be something simple like “they decide where they’re going.” Now choose one character. On the same page, summarize the dialogue from that character. You’re trying to create an overview of their participation in the conversation. Read the overview and answer the following questions: Has this character changed since their last conversation? Is this change plausible? If so, why? Is there something you should add to this character’s reaction in this scene? If you need help with this, go back to that character’s bio (or create one, if you haven’t already) from the assignment in Chapter 6: Universal Character Tools.



# ORIGIN

*Dan Brown*

About a year ago, Kirsch had surprised Langdon by asking him not about art, but about God—an odd topic for a self-proclaimed atheist. Over a plate of short-rib crudo at Boston’s Tiger Mama, Kirsch had picked Langdon’s brain on the core beliefs of various world religions, in particular their different stories of the Creation.

Langdon gave him a solid overview of current beliefs, from the Genesis story shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all the way through the Hindu story of Brahma, the Babylonian tale of Marduk, and others.

“I’m curious,” Langdon asked as they left the restaurant. “Why is a futurist so interested in the past? Does this mean our famous atheist has finally found God?”

Edmond let out a hearty laugh. “Wishful thinking! I’m just sizing up my competition, Robert.”

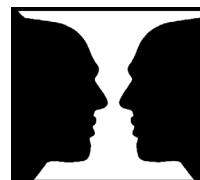
Langdon smiled. *Typical*. “Well, science and religion are not competitors, they’re two different languages trying to tell the same story. There’s room in this world for both,”

After that meeting, Edmond had dropped out of contact for almost a year. And then, out of the blue, three days ago, Langdon had received a FedEx envelope with a plane ticket, a hotel reservation, and a handwritten note from Edmond urging him to attend tonight’s event. It read: *Robert, it would mean the world to me if you of all people could attend. Your insights during our last conversation helped make this night possible.*

Langdon was baffled. Nothing about that conversation seemed remotely relevant to an event that would be hosted by a futurist.

The FedEx envelope also included a black-and-white image of two people standing face-to-face. Kirsch had written a short poem to Langdon.

Robert,  
When you see me face-to-face,  
I’ll reveal the empty space.  
-Edmond



Langdon smiled when he saw the image—a clever allusion to an episode in which Langdon had been involved several years earlier. The silhouette of a chalice, or Grail cup, revealed itself in the empty space between the two faces.

Now Langdon stood outside this museum, eager to learn what his former student was about to announce. A light breeze ruffled his jacket tails as he moved along the cement walkway on the bank of the meandering Nervi3n River, which had once been the lifeblood of a thriving industrial city. The air smelled vaguely of copper.

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## I

“You’re going to have to create a lot of language, a lot of plot, and a lot of dialogue that doesn’t make your final draft. By distilling a lot of information into tight little gems, you will create a story that is nothing but the best of what you have written.”

# EDITING AND REWRITING

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Know When It's Not Working*

*Write a Lot, Edit More*

*Edit From the Perspective of Your Reader*

*Create a System for Tracking the Status of Your Edit*

*Payoffs: Try Doing a 180*

*Get Feedback at the Right Time, From the Right People*

*Know When You're Done*

*Commit to Your Ideas*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

The process of writing a novel can take months to years, and along the way you'll probably encounter obstacles. It's normal to lose your way, so allow yourself to make mistakes, to delete passages and plot lines, and to reconsider earlier events. You'll be able to fix most problems you encounter with a bit of work.

If the big idea itself seems to be failing, you may have to reconsider your approach. Don't be afraid to rewrite your early chapters or revise your characters. Maybe the idea itself needs to evolve. This is all part of the process of editing, and it can be frustrating. But you should commit yourself to your idea, and don't give up on it. Abandoning the thing that really inspired you is lazy editing.

There are two kinds of editing: editing as you write, and editing once you've finished a draft. It's a good idea to practice the first type on a daily basis by tightening your prose to make it concise and effective. When reviewing the work that you've just done, ask yourself if it conveys what you meant it to, if it makes sense, and if the writing feels good. The second type of editing involves reading an entire manuscript while

trying to imagine what a reader will think of it. This is challenging because you've spent quite a bit of time with the story already, so your perspective won't be that of a new reader. To get around this, put the manuscript aside for a few weeks or months before you do this kind of edit. Even a little break can give you a fresh eye later. When you go back to the manuscript, try to print out a physical copy. This is similar to how many readers will experience it, and it can put you closer to a reader's experience.

Sometimes it's hard to decide when you're done with a manuscript. You may have a whole draft but it feels incomplete, or you find yourself disliking it. Don't spend too much time editing the same problem areas over and over. This is a type of procrastination and will generally only augment your feelings of frustration. Try to find a balance: edit to smooth out your writing but don't edit so much that you ruin the original magic of your novel.

You'll have to find a balance between writing with confidence, and writing with detached judgment. Let your confidence carry you through the actual writing, but use a critical eye later to edit and refine your work. In the end, your own sense of good and bad will be your

best guide, so listen to that inner voice that tells you when something isn't working, and go back to fix the writing until it feels right.

#### LEARN MORE

There are some great online tools for editing a novel. They range from the [Hemingway App](#), which will help make your prose more concise, to [AutoCrit](#), an all-purpose tool that will help with story structure, pacing, and language. Microsoft's [SmartEdit](#) works on a word-by-word basis, helping you spot problem areas and clean up sloppy diction, and [Grammarly](#) will do the same (but, in addition, will follow you around the web as you type anything).

For a startling experience, paste your writing into the online tool [Cliché Finder](#) to spot the areas you need to improve.

At some point, you'll need to show your work to other people. A new reader can provide valuable feedback, but finding a good one can be difficult. You'll want to choose someone who likes the type of writing you've done and who isn't going to be inclined to praise your work just because they love you—in other words, you need someone relatively objective. Other

writers are often a great choice as readers. They understand what makes a novel work and where it can be improved. Often you can set up a trade, where you provide feedback on their manuscript in return. [Writer's Café](#) is an excellent online resource for connecting with other writers to get your work reviewed and edited. On that site, you can also join writing groups or take courses in the craft. Also, check out The Write Life's [40 Places to Find a Critique Partner Who Will Help You Improve Your Writing](#) for a list of resources that can link you with readers and writers.

#### WRITING EXERCISES

##### For Your Novel

Create a color-coding scheme to keep track of the condition of your writing like Dan does. Mark all the writing you're satisfied with in green, the writing you're not sure about in yellow, and the writing you know needs to be improved in red. As you review your manuscript, your goal will be to get everything green. Having color cues and a concrete objective can gamify the experience of editing for you and turn it from a tedious exercise into a challenge.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN PROTECTING YOUR PROCESS

I

DAN BROWN

“Writing a novel is not all about inspiration and craft. It is about process...about making sure that you set aside time every day to do your work.”





# PROTECTING YOUR PROCESS

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Limit Distractions*

*Be Tough on Process, But Gentle on Output*

*Give Crazy Ideas a Chance*

*Write Hours, Not Pages*

*Set the Table for Breakfast*

*Stimulate Creativity Through Physical Activity*

*Don't Focus on Details Too Early*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

Novel writing is about inspiration and craft, but those skills won't go far without a devoted practice. Try setting time aside every day to write. This involves considering the place you'll be writing, and sticking to a consistent time of day and duration of time. Try to create a dedicated space for yourself that has no distractions like email, internet, or phone. While you're writing, don't stop—not even to do quick research. Dan makes notes in his text at the places where he needs to go online to do research, and he follows up on it later. You don't have to have an ideal writing space with a beautiful view and an expensive desk. Privacy and intention are more important than the quality of your surroundings.

Be firm with yourself (and others) about your routine. When you're actively writing a novel, don't worry if your word count isn't what it needs to be. You can be gentle with yourself about the *amount* you produce, but continue to be tough with yourself about the *consistency* of your practice. Don't focus too much on the details of your writing. Just try to get the words on the page. Think of it like carving a sculpture from a block of marble. As you chip away at the marble, the sculpture slowly emerges, but

for a long time it looks like a shapeless blob. You don't have to perfect every bit of it as you go along. Try carving the whole form first, and then go back to the finer details once you've got the overall shape. At the end of your work period, prepare for the work on the following day—what Dan calls “setting the table for breakfast”—by writing a paragraph or a note to yourself about what to keep working on the next day. It's a good way to remind yourself of where you left off and what ideas you may have for continuing a scene.

Include brainstorming sessions in your writing process, and create a space where you allow yourself to come up with bad ideas. Every once in a while, you may stumble on a good one. Writing is not just sitting at your desk. It can be talking into a recorder, creating lists of bullet points, even writing snippets of scenes on scraps of paper. It's also helpful to stay physically active. Move around frequently, and set a timer to remind yourself to get up from your desk. Movement can stimulate fresh ideas. Sometimes engaging in a mundane activity can do the same. Dan's advice to “protect the process and the results will take care of themselves” means that as long as you keep at it, your resolution will carry you through the hard work needed to finish your novel.

## LEARN MORE

For some of the most practical advice you'll find about the writing process, read Stephen King's memoir *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000). He combines blunt, common sense wisdom with plenty of examples from his own writing life.

At some point, you may find yourself mid-way through a novel—in what Dan calls the “middle muddle”—and not sure how to proceed. That's the perfect time to learn more about **story structure**. Learning about the basic structures that underlie most stories will often give you the tools you need to carry on, and they will most likely save you from numerous re-writes later. Script writers excel at conceptualizing structure, and while they may write for filmmakers, their principles apply just as well to novelists. Check out *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997) by Robert McKee. It's a veritable bible on crafting stories. It may take you a while to get through all the information in his book, but the longer you spend with it, the more it gives back. For a shorter take on structure, read *Save the Cat* (2005) by Blake Snyder. This bestselling guide not only gives you a clear breakdown of structure, it offers plenty of tips for getting back on track when you're stuck. James Scott Bell has a structural philosophy of his own, informed by his many years of analyzing novels and movies, that he shares in *Super Structure: The Key to Unleashing the Power of Story* (2015). Also, be sure to check out [The Kill Zone](#), where Bell and others share weekly writing advice specifically for thriller writers.

## WRITING EXERCISES

If you haven't done so already, set up your writing space. This can be a desk, a table, or a comfortable chair. Some writers prefer to stand while they work. Do whatever you prefer and refine it as you go along. Keep your inspiration, books, and research materials close at hand. Tape favorite quotes to your computer or a nearby wall. Keeping your space clean can have a powerful effect on your determination. Work at this space at the same time every day for seven days in a row and pay attention to any changes you experience as you progress. You may find that habituating yourself with a ritual time and place makes it easier to get into the zone when you start writing each day, and, while you're there, will make it easier to stay inspired and fresh.

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**For Your Novel**

Next time you're stuck—at any point in your writing—do the following exercise. On a sheet of paper, list all the characters who are not “onstage” in the last scene you wrote. Describe briefly what each of those characters is doing offstage. Sometimes brainstorming what the novel's other characters are up to (particularly if they're plotting to do something to your hero) can trigger fresh ideas for how to proceed.

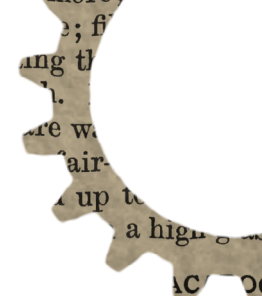
## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN LIFE AS A WRITER

I

DAN BROWN

“If you’re really looking to build a career as a writer, you need to surround yourself with the people who can help make it happen.”





# LIFE AS A WRITER

## SUBCHAPTERS

*Be Persistent*

*Invest in Yourself*

*Build a Team That Believes in You*

*Write a Great Query Letter*

## CHAPTER REVIEW

The same commitment you brought to writing your novel will be critical when facing the publishing world. For beginning writers, publication can be a difficult path. Dan wrote three novels before his breakout success with *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), and in much of that time he had to bring the same consistency and determination to selling his work as he did to the writing itself.

The steps to publication involve finding an agent, working with an agent to sell your novel to a publisher, working with a publisher to prepare your book for launch, and marketing your book. This process can take years. Self-publishing is another option. You'll cut out the agent and publisher, and produce and market a book on your own. It may be a quicker route to publication, but it still requires a lot of work. In either case, you switch from being a writer to being a writer and a business person.

For a lot of newly-published authors, promoting your novel means committing your own time and resources. You may have to find your own opportunities, which means seeking out bookstores, libraries, radio shows, and book clubs that can spread the word about your novel. You may have to make appearances and do your own preparation work for book signings and talks. Like writing a novel, these short-term

investments of time and energy will pay off in the long term. Ultimately, you're investing in yourself.

Building a readership takes time, and you might have to write a few novels before you begin to see returns on the work that you've done. This is why Dan encourages you to build a team that believes in you. Find an agent and an editor who are passionate about your writing. Most of all, commit to the process of building a readership. It's going to help you make a career out of your creative passions.

## LEARN MORE

Once you've finished editing your novel, you have two choices: you can self-publish or sell your book to a publisher. **Self-publishing** has become more popular with the rise of e-books and the ease with which you can upload your work to online booksellers like Amazon and iTunes. You'll have to make all of your own decisions in the publishing process, and this often requires hiring editors, copyeditors, proofreaders, and cover artists. If that route interests you, check out Jane Friedman's primer article [\*Start Here: How to Self-Publish Your Book\*](#).

Most traditional publishers won't consider manuscripts sent directly from writers, so if you want a traditional publisher, you'll need to find an **agent**. This can be as difficult as finding



a publisher, but a good agent will support you through a number of critical steps. Often, they will work with you to polish your manuscript before they send it to publishing houses. They will find an appropriate editor and negotiate to sell your book for the highest advance. They can guide you through the entire publishing process and, if the relationship is fruitful, they will work with you on future projects. They generally handle all the money transactions between you and the publisher, taking a percentage off the top. (They should never ask you for payment up front.) The most important quality to look for in an agent is enthusiasm about your project. Be wary of agents who are just looking for more of the same books they already represent, or who are only interested in making a quick sale.

To begin finding an agent, sign up for [AgentQuery](#) or [QueryTracker](#). Both websites have listings of agents who are looking for new authors, and both will help you refine your search to find the right types of agents for your novel. Also consider signing up for [Publishers Marketplace](#), which will allow you to track current book deals and find out which agents are selling books like yours.

While you're figuring out which agents you'd like to query, you'll need to craft an excellent **query letter**. It should be concise (no more than three paragraphs) but just as exciting and suspenseful as your novel. To get started, read Jane Friedman's article [A Complete Guide to Query Letters](#). *Writer's Digest* also has a series called [Successful Queries](#) that showcases query letters that worked.

One of the hardest things you'll have to do as a writer is synopsisize your novel. A mini-synopsis will be critical in catching an agent's interest and should be included in your query letter. This "elevator pitch" will be based on your sole dramatic question (see the assignment in Chapter 10: Building a Story From the Ground Up). Many agents will also request that you send a longer synopsis (one to two pages) covering the whole narrative arc of your novel. If you've already written an outline, this work will be significantly easier. For help writing a synopsis, read Pub(lishing) Crawl's excellent advice in [How to Write a 1-Page Synopsis](#).

Once you've found an agent and polished up your manuscript, your agent will begin trying to sell your novel to an editor. Most publishing houses have numerous editors on staff. It's your agent's job to figure out which editors would be best suited to your work, and to query those editors (much like you queried your agent) until they find one who wants to buy your book. For more on the role of editors in the current publishing world, read NPR's article [What Exactly Does an Editor Do?](#)

Ideally, you'll begin the work of promoting your novel before you even finish it. You're going to need to know how to talk about your novel, how to connect with like-minded writers, and how to find your best audience. For great advice on how to prepare for this phase of publication, read Tony Levelle's list of [15 DIY Book Promotion Tools You Need to Know](#).



## WRITING EXERCISES

### For Your Novel

This exercise will create your elevator pitch. On a page in your notebook, write down your sole dramatic question. Then write one sentence on each of the following points:

- How your protagonist gets involved in the story
- What conflict or mystery arises to move the story forward
- The world of your story
- The top thing that makes your book interesting

In 50 words or less, combine the above information into a single paragraph.

On a page in your notebook, write a one-page synopsis in the following format:

- In paragraph one, introduce your hero, the conflict, and the world.
- In paragraph two, explain which major plot turns happen to your hero. Pick only the big ones. It's a good idea to include a mention of your villain and the most important secondary character (sidekick or love interest).
- In paragraph three, describe how the novel's major conflicts are resolved. You must reveal the ending.

Any presentation or book signing you do should create its own suspense. Don't bore listeners by reading long passages out loud. Talk about your novel's premise, give them enough to get them interested and excited, then let them buy the book to find out what happens. To prepare for this, take your synopsis from the exercise above and expand it. On a page in your notebook, make the synopsis longer (5-10 pages) by adding more information. Find ways to hook the reader. Don't reveal your ending. Be sure it touches on the following questions:

- What makes my world interesting?
- Why will a reader care about my protagonist?
- Who is my villain?
- Who is my sidekick or love interest? How do they relate to my protagonist?
- What is the moral gray area here?
- What's at stake for my protagonist?

In front of a mirror, practice talking about your book. Use this new synopsis as a framework for describing your novel. Read from the page, but don't be afraid to be spontaneous. Try to speak naturally, as if you're explaining the novel to a friend. Time yourself and try to stay under 20 minutes.

MASTERCLASS

## CHAPTER NINETEEN THE SECRET OF SECRETS

I

DAN BROWN

"There will be days you just don't know if you can  
do it. And on those days what is going to  
save you is your process."





# THE SECRET OF SECRETS

## CHAPTER REVIEW

Writing a novel is a huge undertaking, and self-doubt is a natural part of that process. It can happen at any time. Perhaps in the early stages you feel daunted by the task, or mid-way through your novel, you begin to lose your way. Even a big success can cause you to stumble. After the triumph of *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), Dan found himself worried about the pressure of a huge readership eagerly anticipating his next book. Would he live up to their expectations?

No matter what phase of writing you're in, remember to focus on your process. It will help keep you grounded and give you a sense of accomplishment with the things you can control—finishing your novel or researching a new world or promoting your book. Sometimes you'll need your creativity for more than just writing. It can help you find ways to get through rejection or stay motivated and confident when you're working alone for long periods of time. Dan's *Secret of Secrets* was not just a project, it was a tool for sustaining his courage and determination in a time of self-doubt. Whenever you begin to doubt yourself, go back to the rituals you've created around your writing and find ways to support and respect your work. Do whatever it takes to convince yourself that you can finish your novel. Know that the story already exists inside you, and that you have the skills to get that story onto the page.

## LEARN MORE

An old writing joke goes, "Give a child a book and they'll read for a day. Teach a child to write and they'll spend a lifetime mired in self-doubt." While it's a common enough experience, self-doubt can also affect your creativity and your output. Julia Cameron's groundbreaking courses on sustaining creativity led to the creation of *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (1992). The book's title is slightly misleading: it's actually an extremely practical course for overcoming the beliefs that fuel self-doubt. You may want to read it even when you're not crippled by angst, because it's simply good medicine to challenge your fears at any stage of the process.

**Organization** is a big part of creating a ritual. Sometimes this simply means sticking to a daily routine, but there are plenty of other things you can do to stay organized. Try gamifying your writing ritual by using [Streaks](#), an app that allows you to structure daily goals for yourself and then receive credits when you complete those goals. [Evernote](#) is not only a great place to store your research, you can also record audio notes and jot down quick thoughts, keeping everything in one place. [MindNode](#) is a tool for creating a "mind map" where you can record your best brainstorming sessions. And the handy app [SquareSpaceNote](#) will sync your electronic scribbles from all sources so you can jot down ideas at any time and have

them all organized when you sit down to write. If you're really serious about organizing your ritual, [Marinara Timer](#) is a customizable productivity timer that will give you timed sessions for writing (with breaks) so you can maximize your output. Once you have an idea of what kind of time and productivity you have, you can use the free online [Writing Schedule Calculator](#) to come up with an estimate of how long it will take you to complete your novel.

#### WRITING EXERCISES

Sometimes you can jolt yourself out of a rut with a simple practice known as the Pomodoro technique. Do the following:

- Decide on what you would like to write. This can be a scene, a chapter of your novel, or simply a page of freewriting that will help stimulate an idea.
- Set a timer for 25 minutes and write until the timer rings.
- Take a five-minute break and repeat these three steps, sticking carefully to the clock.

For an explanation of why this technique is so effective, read Nicole Bianchi's article [How to Supercharge Your Writing Productivity](#).





# CLOSING

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DAN BROWN

“Writing a novel is an enormous undertaking, and self-doubt will be part of that process. There will be days you just don’t know if you can do it. And on those days what is gonna save you is your process. Your ritual. So if you’re just starting to write a novel, go create that process, go create that ritual. And if you are in the middle of a novel right now, re-commit to that ritual. And I wish you the very best of luck.”